II
Bokuto Uno
ILLUSTRATION BY
Ruria Miyuki
Reign of the SEVEN SPELLBLADES

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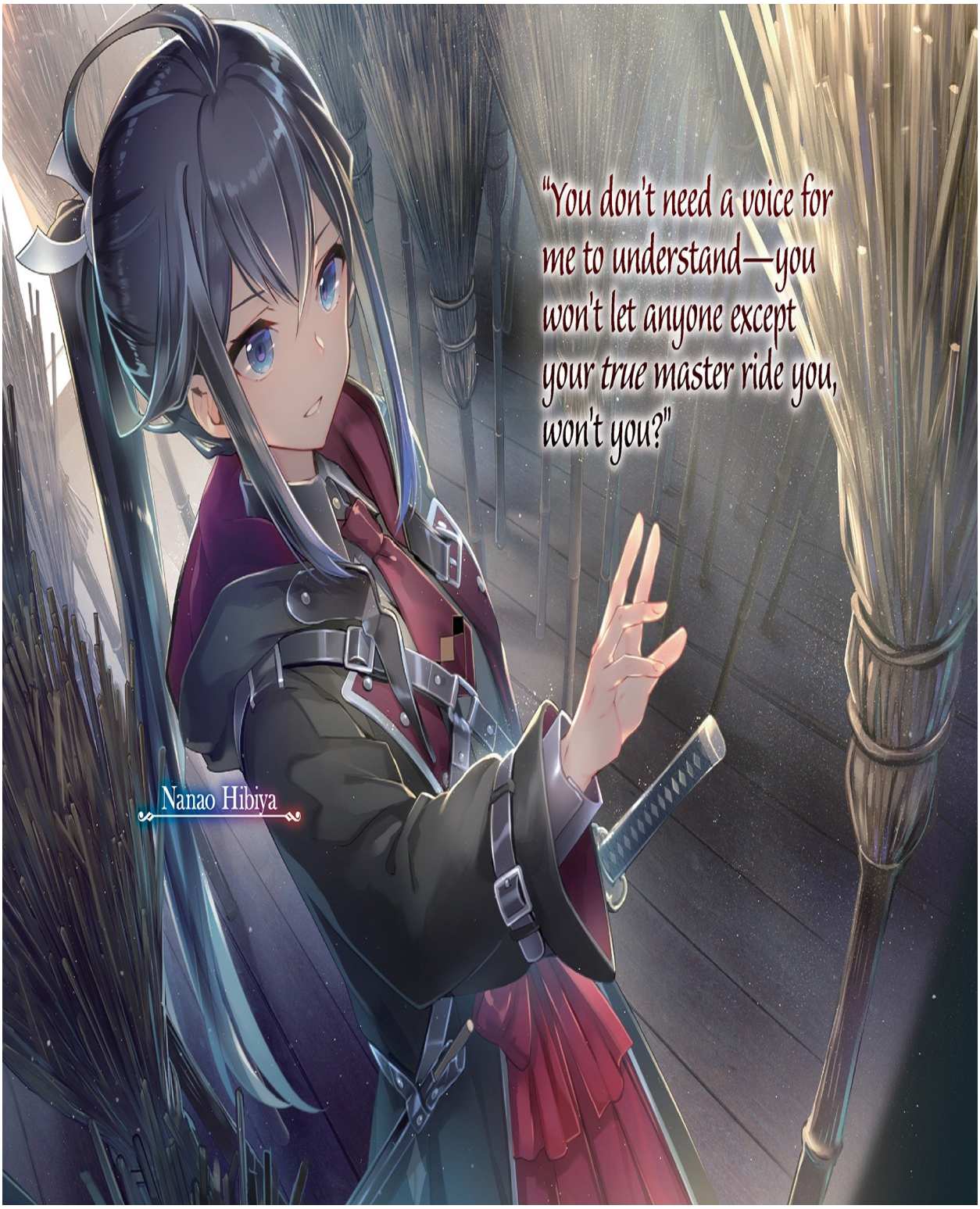
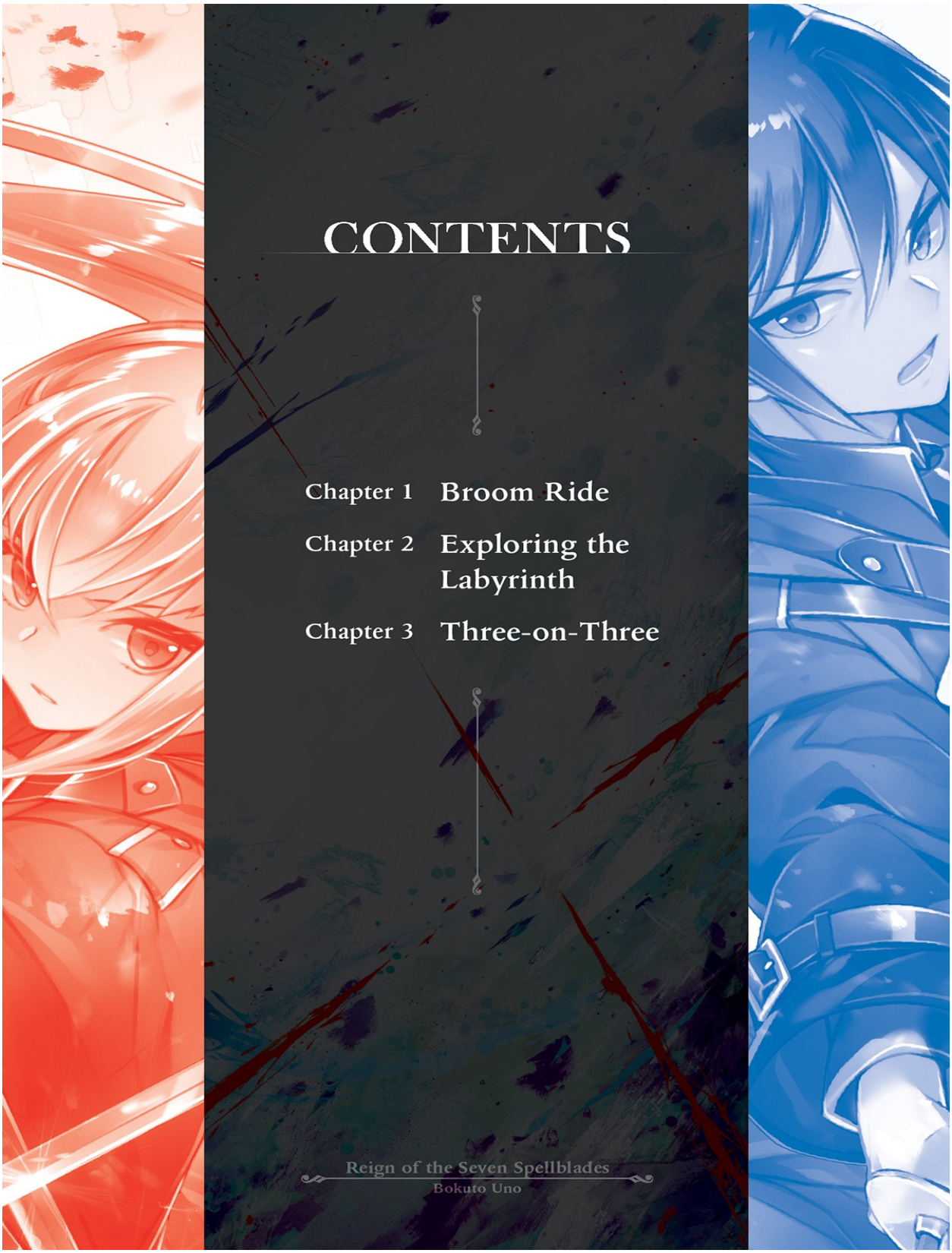

"You don't need a voice for me to understand—you won't let anyone except your true master ride you, won't you?"
Nanao Hibiya

"What is it, Pete?!"
"It— It's nothing!
Nothing, okay?
St-stay away!"
Pete Reston
Oliver Horn

"Come forward and name yourselves, eh? Who wants to join the party?"
Michela McFarlane
Tullio Rossi



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Bokuto Uno

ILLUSTRATION BY

Ruria Miyuki

YEN ON

New York

Copyright

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Bokuto Uno
Translation by Alex Keller-Nelson
Cover art by Ruria Miyuki
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CHAPTER 1

Broom Ride

CHAPTER 1

Broom Ride

It was oddly difficult to sleep that night. His dreams, especially, were out of the ordinary. He was submerged up to his shoulders in lukewarm mud. His limbs felt heavy, and he could hardly move—in fact, it was difficult to tell where his body stopped and the mud began. He couldn't even comprehend his own form.

Bubbles rose and popped on the surface of the muddy swamp. The swamp seemed to be slowly heating up from the bottom, as if there were a fire beneath him. The moment the boy realized this, he panicked and began desperately struggling. Senses dulled, he tried to claw his way out but couldn't escape. Heat stung at his feet before gradually rising through his body, and yet the discomfort was helping to make his own form clearer, little by little…

"Wah!"

The moment the heat became too much for his body to bear, Pete Reston jolted up in his bed.

"*Pant, pant, pant…* What was that dream…?" he wondered aloud in the dark room, his breath ragged. At the same time, he became aware of how hot his body was, like he'd just finished sprinting for his life. His damp sheets clung uncomfortably to his skin. He frowned. "Damn, I'm so sweaty. I need to change…"

His dresser was next to his bed. He reached out for it, then sensed something was off and froze. He couldn't place it specifically, but moving his body felt strange. Most of all—there was one part of his body he could hardly even feel.

"…?"

Puzzled, he looked down, removed his blanket with one hand, and came face-to-face with *it*.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!"

His scream shattered the early-morning quiet. Oliver's eyes flew open.

"What is it, Pete?!"

Oliver snatched his athame from the bedside table and jumped out of bed, instantly preparing himself for battle. He looked toward his roommate to see that Pete had his blanket pulled up all the way to his neck, his face beet-red.

"It— It's nothing! Nothing, okay? St-stay away!" Pete shouted as Oliver instinctively approached. Confused by the sudden rebuke, Oliver cocked his head.

“…? You screamed way too loudly for it to be nothing. If something’s wrong, just tell me—”

“It’s fine! Back! Stay back! Don’t come near me!”

Pete’s tone became more and more belligerent until he eventually began tossing anything within reach. Oliver, sensing his roommate was half-crazed with panic, raised his hands in an attempt to pacify him.

“Calm down, Pete! I’m not gonna do anything to you! Let’s just talk—Gwah!”

Before his efforts could bear fruit, however, an alarm clock sailed through the air and smashed into his nose.

“Good morning, boys… Huh?”

The girls were already eating breakfast in the cafeteria. Katie was the first one to notice something was up with the three boys as they arrived ten minutes late. Oliver and Guy shared awkward looks as Pete stood unnaturally far away from the two of them.

“D-did you three have a fight? This all feels kind of uncomfortable…”

“Nah, me and Oliver are fine. It’s this guy—”

“Wah! D-don’t touch me!”

Guy reached out to smack Pete’s shoulder, only for Pete to recoil from his friend’s hand. Guy sighed and sat down.

“…As you can see, he’s suddenly hit his rebellious phase. We asked what was wrong, but he just insists it’s ‘nothing.’ What d’you all think?”

“Hmm? Pete, you don’t seem to be sick…”

“Wh-wh-whoa!”

Chela stood up and began to walk over to Pete, but he reflexively jumped back. The ringlet-haired girl slumped in disappointment.

“So I’m not allowed near you, either? …Oh, how lonely it is to be rejected by a friend!” Chela lamented, looking at the ground dejectedly.

“I-it’s not what you think…!” Pete stuttered, flustered.

After watching them for a bit, Katie stopped eating her breakfast and spoke up.

“I’ll bet this was Guy’s fault. Pete, you can confide in me. Don’t worry.”

“Why am I the suspect? Oliver’s his roommate. That’s pretty rich of you, acting like some big sister. All I see is a little shrimp.”

Sparks flew as they glared at each other until each of them picked up a piece of cutlery and began clashing for real. Chela grinned at their shenanigans as Oliver sat down next to the Azian girl.

“Morning, Nanao. You have any ideas about what’s eating Pete?”

“Good morning, Oliver. Unfortunately, I haven’t a clue. But he does seem different today,” she answered honestly.

Pete, unable to bear all the attention, turned on his heel without ever sitting down at the table.

“I-I’m leaving…! Don’t talk to me today!”

“You’re skipping breakfast? Pete, that’s not good for you—”

Chela tried to stop him, but the bespectacled boy ignored her and hurried out of the cafeteria. Oliver sighed as he watched him go.

"…Guess we'll just have to watch and wait for now."

"Good of you to come, pathetic creatures who crawl upon the earth! Today is the day of your evolution!" the young male instructor proclaimed with utter sincerity as he gallantly appeared before the group of about forty students gathered in the courtyard. The students frowned, but the instructor's smile was an expression of pure celebration.

"There are many reasons to pity the nonmagicals, but the saddest of all is that they cannot fly. Don't you agree? They spend their entire lives on the ground, and their deaths underneath it! I can't think of anything more sad or pathetic… Ah, and before you ask, I'm going to have a sky burial. The birds will have my flesh, and I shall return to the sky!" the teacher proudly stated.

After all they'd experienced since starting at Kimberly, none of the students were surprised by the instructor's thoughtless remarks. They were so jaded, in fact, that Guy even had the gall to whisper, "Until you turn into bird poop and get dropped to the ground anyway." Oliver had to hold back a chuckle.

"With that out of the way, my name is Dustin Hedges, and I teach broomriding here at Kimberly. If you need my attention, please address me as Instructor Dustin. Due to personal reasons, I'm currently not on good terms with my family, you see. Anyway, first, you need brooms! Let me show you to the broomhouse. Follow me now!"

The instructor strode off dramatically, beckoning the students to follow. As they walked behind him, Nanao folded her arms and frowned.

"Mmm… So the time has finally come."

"? I don't think I've ever seen you more worried than curious, Nanao," Oliver said.

"I'm not worried; I simply do not feel this is feasible. A living creature would be one thing, but mounting a broom and levitating? I cannot fathom it," Nanao responded quite honestly.

Oliver grinned. "…I see. You seem to be under a common misconception."

"Mm?"

"Let me share a secret with you: Brooms can't fly. This is true for both the nonmagical world and the magical one."

"What? But, Oliver, are you not—?"

—*holding a broom over your shoulder?* She shifted her gaze to his back, where he was indeed carrying a broomstick about as long as he was tall. Oliver ignored her question and grinned mysteriously. Soon, they reached a large building.

"This is the broomhouse," Dustin announced. "Let me warn you, though: Some of them can be quite temperamental."

Dustin then drew his white wand. He cast a spell, and the latch to the broomhouse dropped away. The iron double doors swung open with a heavy creak, and a gust of hot air came rushing out.

"Mm? This smell…"

Nanao, perplexed, sniffed the air. A fair number of the other students were doing the same. The broomriding instructor grinned.

"Those of you born to nonmagicals seem to have already picked up on it. This place doesn't have the feel of a simple broomstick storage shed, does it? Especially the smell," Dustin said as he strode inside the building. He was right—the air in the broomhouse was different. Woodchips and twigs were scattered around the expansive space, and a wild smell permeated the entire building. It was more like a barn than anything else. Cautiously, the students stepped inside—when suddenly, a fleet of broomsticks rushed past over their heads.

"Whoa!"

"The friendlier ones have gathered, then. Well, go on. Say hello. These are your future partners."

The fleet of broomsticks swirled overhead like a great whirlpool; one by one, the broomsticks landed and drew closer. They certainly did seem "friendly." One broom extended its handle toward Nanao, who prodded it and narrowed her eyes.

"These aren't objects—they're living things," the Azian girl noted intuitively. The instructor nodded in acknowledgment.

"That's right. Genus *Besom*, of the subfamily Scopae, to be exact. No spells were cast on these brooms—they're full-on magical creatures. They move on their own and can even breed."

The students from nonmagical families stared in awe at the flying broomsticks, which looked so nimble and free. Dustin continued:

"They're not fake, either. Long ago, we used these creatures' remains for cleaning, which is how the household brooms you know came to be. But chronologically speaking, these beings came first. It is only in recent millennia that we have learned to ride them. Going further back, we've discovered fossils dating a hundred thousand years old. They're very long-lived, these brooms. By the way, the young man with the glasses—what you're stepping in is broom poop."

"Uwah?!"

Pete quickly jumped back. Dustin cackled at his reaction.

"No need to worry. It's not dirty. You see, brooms don't eat like we do. What they mainly consume is magic particles and elementals. As they fly through the air, they absorb them into their bodies. It's closer to breathing than eating, really. You may have heard about something similar with migratory fish."

Oliver nodded. Many types of fish preferred not to hunt for prey, but to instead move through the water at high speeds and eat whatever tiny

organisms got sucked into their mouths. The brooms simply did this in the air.

“Naturally, you won’t be getting a free ride from these guys. The mana they receive from mages is like a feast. So while we ride them, they’re consuming our mana as fuel. This allows them to fly much faster than they would alone, making the experience pleasant for them as well.”

The instructor stroked a nearby broom as he spoke. To nonmagicals, the creature’s tail seemed like it was just a collection of dried twigs, but even this was the result of, in magical biological terms, evolution. Katie, who seemed to know this already, gazed dreamily at the brooms.

“But as they are living creatures, not every rider will be a match for each one. Your size and personality are an important part of the equation, but what’s most important is the mana you can provide them. If they don’t like this aspect of you, a broom won’t let you ride it. In human terms, you could say it’s like if you were offered unlimited beer. Unless you loved the flavor, you’d probably reject it.”

Dustin attempted to give a relatable example, but as the students were still too young to drink alcohol, they seemed more puzzled than anything. Unbothered, the instructor continued:

“If you touch the shaft, they’ll be able to read the compatibility of your mana. Now go and find your partners! Get to it, before someone steals your darling away!”

This was the signal for the Broom Matching to begin. Encouraged by the instructor’s words, the students dashed over to the brooms in a hurry. Chela stepped next to Oliver and caught his attention.

“You’ve brought your own broom, then, Oliver?”

“Yeah, we’ve known each other a while. I’m a bit disappointed that I can’t join in on the fun, though.”

“I know. I was looking forward to this, too. Well, Nanao, Katie, Guy, and Pete—let us go forth! Let’s find some fantastic partners!” Chela called out to all her friends, even though Pete was keeping his distance, and together, they walked over to the brooms. Katie and Guy gazed at the flying creatures in thought.

“Aw, they’re all so lovely… How are we supposed to pick just one…?”

“Hmm… H-hey, how ’bout you? …Whoa, geez!”

Guy casually reached out for a broom, and it swung its shaft at him angrily. Oliver smirked. Brooms wouldn’t let you touch them if they didn’t like you—more proof that they were indeed living creatures.

“…Hey, look…”

“Whoa…”

A few minutes after the Matching began, the students, who were completely engrossed in choosing their brooms, began to notice something strange. They fixated their gazes on the Azian girl, who was walking about and observing the brooms just like them—however, nearly a hundred

brooms were swarming around her. The instructor seemed quite impressed by the massive reaction.

“Well, well. You seem to possess something the brooms love, Ms. Hibiya. This often happens when one possesses clear, unprejudiced mana. You won’t have any trouble finding a partner.”

“That is good to hear. I appreciate their warm welcome— Mm?”

She didn’t appear to be walking to the brooms so much as letting them come to her as she advanced—until suddenly, she stopped. Her eyes froze on a lone broom way in the back of the building, lying completely still against the broom rack that was their resting place.

“Are you not going to come out and join us?”

“Wait! Not that one!” Dustin frantically called as Nanao began walking toward it. She turned and looked at him quizzically, so he explained. “That one’s especially wild. It’s also acted very rough during the Matching, so it’s been years since anyone’s truly ridden it. You’ll end up black-and-blue if you aren’t careful.”

His warning was stern. Nanao nodded but didn’t turn back. The other brooms, sensing danger, distanced themselves as she reached out toward the silent broom without a shred of fear—and the broom swiped menacingly at the air just in front of her fingertips.

“Ohhh, I see.”

Unbothered by the rejection, Nanao reached out her hand farther. The broom swung at her like a whip, as if to say, *I warned you!* Nanao deftly dealt with each strike using both hands and smiled.

“This brings back memories… Akikaze was like this in the beginning, too.” The girl’s eyes filled with nostalgia. The other students gaped as they watched this exchange, but Nanao continued to speak calmly. “You don’t need a voice for me to understand—you won’t let anyone except your *true* master ride you, won’t you?”

The moment she said those words, the bucking broom froze. In the strained silence, the girl and broom faced each other.

“I don’t intend to force you, should you refuse. But with that said, I have one message for you: This young lady likes you the most of all.”

And with that, she reached out confidently with her right hand, her eyes burning with determination. After a long silence, the broom rocketed up to the ceiling, then abruptly changed its trajectory and descended in a beautiful half circle before reaching the ground. Upon finishing its short but amazing flight, it came to rest its shaft firmly in her right hand.

“I accept. Then let us go forth together.”

Feeling the weight of its acceptance in her palm, Nanao turned around in a commanding manner, her new partner in hand. The students’ jaws were on the floor.

“…You’ve gotta be kidding.”

Even the instructor was stunned. He gawked at her as she ran straight to her friend.

“Oliver, I’ve decided on this one!”

“R-right. Congrats, Nanao.”

Oliver snapped out of his awestruck daze just in time to respond as Nanao proudly showed off her first broom.

Dustin stared, then covered part of his face with his hand. “…She actually grabbed it… I’m a little shocked—no, more than just a little. After all my failed attempts with that broom… But I see… Yes, it makes sense. *Her* mana was pleasantly clear, too.”

Dustin’s self-deprecating mutterings fell on deaf ears—but there was one other person who’d received just as big of a shock.

“…”

“? What’s the matter, Oliver? Why are you staring?”

Oliver’s eyes were so focused on Nanao and her broom that he could have bored holes in them both. Realizing this, he quickly averted his gaze.

“I-it’s nothing… I’m sure that broom will be difficult, but I hope you will treat it kindly.”

“Of course! ’Tis my future partner, after all!” Nanao replied cheerfully. Despite her innocence, he couldn’t shake the strangest feeling. Who could have predicted that this broom, which had only ever allowed one rider before, would partner itself with this girl?

About an hour later, the Broom Matching was over. Not everyone had it so easy, but in the end, each student had a broom. The new pairs lined up in the courtyard, and their instructor finished pulling himself together and resumed the class.

“Now that you have your partners, it’s time for actual flying lessons. You all see your saddles and stirrups before you, yes?”

The students looked down at the grass and saw saddles and stirrups much like those used for horses, only smaller. Their use was obvious, but Dustin continued to explain anyway.

“First, you must saddle your brooms. Perhaps a thousand years ago, people rode bareback, but not in this day and age. Although, if you love having your crotch torn to shreds, then I won’t stop you—”

“I’m done. Is this acceptable?” Nanao chirped, seeking confirmation of her work.

A strange guffaw escaped the instructor’s throat. “That was fast! Are you kidding? That’s the first real test in my class! It’s tradition for new students to get kicked in the face when they try to force a saddle on their brooms! Even experienced riders have a difficult time with a new broom.”

He hustled over and began inspecting her handiwork for even the tiniest flaw. However, the saddle and stirrups were of extremely simple construction. Once he’d confirmed that the equipment was on straight, there was nothing to complain about. His inspection was done in a flash, and he sighed dramatically.

“…Well, if you’re done, you’re done… Nanao Hibiya. I’ve been teaching broomriding at Kimberly for a relatively long time, but quite frankly, this is

a first for me. I've never been so surprised by a student before they even got off the ground."

The instructor gave his honest opinion. Meanwhile, the other students were struggling hard with their saddles. Many were bleeding from the nose after being kicked by their bucking brooms, with Guy among them. After about twenty minutes, everyone was finally saddled up.

"Good, everyone's managed. I'm sure the veterans want to get in the air already, but for today, we'll be going over the basics with the beginners. Students, mount your brooms!"

At the teacher's orders, the excited students hopped onto their brooms. Instantly, a few of them took off without waiting for his signal. They quickly lost control of the brooms, spiraling through the sky until the instructor unleashed a multitude of spells to catch them all. Their ability to fly gone, the students dropped like flies into the dense shrubbery.

"Yes, yes, good of you to carry on the tradition of shooting off too early. I'm not upset, though. Take a deep breath, center yourselves, and remount your brooms. Ah, this is much better. Now this is a first-year class!"

Dustin seemed deeply relieved to see familiar failures. Oliver, who had been surprised more than once by Nanao in the past, felt a strange sense of companionship. He smiled thinly.

"Start with trying to hover two feet above the ground for thirty seconds. Begin!" Dustin barked, and almost instantly, the students erupted into screams once more. About half of them were able to float steadily, but one after another, many lost their balance and toppled over.

"Whoa!"

"Wah—wah—wah!"

"Ha-ha! Surprisingly difficult, isn't it? It's harder to keep a broom still for extended periods of time than it is to let them fly! But if you acquaint yourself with this feeling first, your flights will be a lot safer. Hey, you there! Introduce yourself! Then I'd like you to tell us what's the most common cause of broom accidents."

The sudden question caught Oliver off guard, but he replied while keeping his broom afloat.

"My name is Oliver Horn. To answer your question, it's most common to fall during an emergency brake. For beginners, it's falling during takeoff."

"Cool as a cucumber, this one. No fun at all. Well, he's right. The higher your altitude, the more likely it is for an accident to be fatal. Even in the worst cases, try to fall feetfirst. Healing magic can't help you if you're dead on impact," the instructor said, giving a smile that sent a chill up the students' spines. It wasn't a threat but a simple fact of life for broomriders. For this reason, many families kept brooms from their children and waited until they were older, once their decision-making abilities were better developed, to teach them flying and what to do in an emergency.

"…Thirty seconds have passed… And of course, you've passed with flying colors."

“Flying colors? Why, I’m just sitting on my broom.”

The teacher’s gaze landed on Nanao, who was floating without difficulty. He pursed his lips unhappily.

“I’m telling you, this is the hard part. Which is why I don’t believe you’re a newbie at all. You’ve taken to broomriding far too easily. Go on, fess up. You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

“I make no falsehoods, sir. However, it is true that this isn’t my first time riding upon the back of a mount. Brooms are much like horses—one must discern their will and bring it into harmony with one’s own,” Nanao replied. Seemingly bored with simply floating, she expertly levitated forward and backward slowly. The instructor frowned and groaned.

“I’ve never ridden a horse, but… I see. A horse, eh? If your performance is any indication, they must share some things in common. Of course, you may just be unique. If you said the same thing to a real broomriding pro, you’d likely send them into a rage.”

A smile creeped onto his lips as the instructor mumbled to himself. It was the same sort of boyish grin that Master Garland sometimes showed. Dustin’s careless remarks at the beginning of class were very Kimberly-esque, but Oliver couldn’t bring himself to detest this man, either.

“Next, we’ll move on to the part you’ve all been waiting for—flying. To me, helpers!”

At the instructor’s call, older students came flying in on broomsticks from somewhere outside the courtyard. There were about twenty of them; they landed and formed lines in front of the first-years.

“Today, you won’t have to worry about falling. If you do, these students will be here on the ground to gently catch you with magic no matter how high you are. So trust in them and fly—isn’t that right, helpers?”

“”””Yes, sir!”””””

The older students replied in unison, striking their chests. It was an inspiring sight to see. With that, the instructor continued the class.

“So, veterans, you’ll be flying first. Let’s have…Mr. Horn, our model flier, you, and you—and you, Ms. Hibiya.”

“Mm? Are you certain you wish to include me among the veterans?” Nanao asked.

“I don’t mind. It’ll give me a bit of relief if you happen to fail spectacularly,” the instructor said with uninhibited spite. On his signal, they got into position. Oliver lined up next to Nanao as they prepared to take off.

“…Don’t push yourself, Nanao,” he said. “Everyone falls on their first flight. If you don’t know how to land, it’s okay to get help.”

“I understand. Whether this fellow will allow it is a different question, however,” she replied, chuckling and looking down at her broom.

Soon, with everyone ready, Dustin gave them their last bit of instruction. “Ready? You’re to fly from here to there, landing a hundred yards away. Your goal is the white line. And… Fly!”

He clapped his hands to signal them. Simultaneously, the four students lifted off the ground—and one rocketed away on their own.

“Huh?”

“Ah?”

“…”

The rest of the class stared in amazement, except for Oliver. He knew this would happen to her if she rode that particular broom—but no one else knew. The instructor’s eyes went wide at the sight of Nanao racing ahead.

“So fast! There’s no way she can stop—in fact, she’s on course to have a terrible crash! Get ready, helpers!”

Nanao shot across the grass, passed the halfway point in the blink of an eye, and prepared to descend. Meanwhile, the instructor barked panicked orders at the older students, who were already prepared to act.

“”””“Elletardus!”””””

They chanted the spell together, unleashing a momentum-hindering spell toward the Azian girl, who was going far too fast to land properly. Five beams of light shot straight at her—

“Hrnph!”

—which Nanao deftly dodged, and just as she was about to hit the ground, she pulled sideways into an arc, decelerating. The wind from her approach rippled through the shrubbery until she finally came to a complete stop. She turned to face the shocked older students with an awkward smile, scratching her head.

“Oh dear. My apologies. I tried to go as slow as possible. This fellow just has too much power.”

“…….Huuuunh?”

The instructor’s face stiffened, as if this was the most absurd thing he’d ever witnessed. Oliver and the others eventually caught up and landed by her, then together, they all flew back at a low altitude. The instructor looked deflated.

“…You know what? You win. You win, Ms. Hibiya. You’re amazing. Talented beyond compare,” Dustin complimented with an undercurrent of resentment. Then he pointed behind her. “And that means it’s time for recruitment hell. Don’t go getting your hand ripped off now.”

“Mm—?”

Nanao, sensing a presence behind her, spun around and came face-to-face with a bunch of older students, their eyes sparkling with excitement.

“That was so impressive…! You have to join our team, Ms. Hibiya!”

“No, ours! Join ours, samurai girl!”

“Oh! We get snacks every day at three!”

“Stop trying to hook her with food! Join us, and I’ll personally pay to outfit you with the highest-quality saddle and stirrups.”

“Bribery is against the rules!”

“Would you like a year of homework-completion services?”

“Wha—? In that case, we’ll—”

One after another, the helpers attempted to top one another's lavish recruitment bonuses. Seeing that the competition was beginning to spiral out of control, the instructor clapped his hands and defused the situation.

"Okay, that's enough. Don't go overboard. We still have class to finish."

The helpers slunk back to their positions as the first-years looked on in confusion.

"As you can see, this class also doubles as a first-year recruitment period. Anyone who shows too much talent is likely to feel the loving, suffocating embrace of their seniors, so be careful. It's too late for Ms. Hibiya, however," he sneered. Nanao still didn't seem to understand her position. His lips still curled in a smile, the instructor muttered under his breath, "Still, this year should prove interesting."

With the morning's classes over, it was time for lunch. At the cafeteria, the only topic of conversation among the six friends was Nanao's newly acquired talent.

"…My jaw was quite literally on the floor. It's been six months since the school year started, and yet, Nanao—you're still surprising us," Chela said, half in awe and half in fear. Nanao laughed as she tore voraciously into her meat pie.

"I had no idea flying lessons would prove to be such fun. I cannot wait for the next one!"

"That's great, real great… Don't suppose you could share some tips with li'l ol' me, eh, Nanao?" Guy said, depression looming on his face. He'd fallen so many times during class that if he didn't improve soon, he wouldn't be able to mount a broom anymore. Nanao exhaled from her nose as she thought.

"From what I saw, you were trying too hard to control the broom. The brooms are the fliers, and we are the riders. Remember that and try to entrust yourself to your partner more."

"It's important to focus on communicating your sincerity to your partner, instead of using your hands to direct them. Take notes from Katie," Chela added.

"Eh-heh-heh-heh. I wasn't nearly as amazing as Nanao, though," Katie said shyly, scratching her head. Totally outclassed by his usual rival, Guy looked at the ground sullenly.

"You fell a lot, too, right, Pete? Maybe we should both get lessons from the girls."

"D-do what you want. I'll practice on my own," Pete responded sharply, refusing to say more. Instead, he focused intently on cutting the herring on his plate and transporting it into his mouth. Guy looked at Oliver dejectedly.

"He's still in his rebellious phase. Such a difficult age, isn't it, Mother dear?"

"That's puberty for you, Father dear. What can you do?"

"You two are *not* my parents!"

Pete slammed the table at their joke. The group burst into laughter when someone interjected:

"'ello. So nice to see you all in such high spirits, eh?" The speaker had a thick Ytallian accent.

The group turned to the source of the voice and saw a boy with almond-shaped eyes standing before them, a very friendly smile on his face. They could tell he was a fellow first-year, but none of them had spoken to him before.

"Hello," Oliver responded, somewhat hesitantly. "Who are you?"

"Tullio Rossi, a first-year. Ah, you do not need to introduce yourselves. I am quite familiar with all of you already, Oliver," Rossi answered, grinning. His gaze crossed the table and landed on Nanao. "A very impressive display this morning, Nanao. For your first ride, it was quite the show. Some people have all the talent, eh? I am completely serious. Will you not share some of it with me?"

Rossi laid on the praise with a heavy dose of irony and even more overfamiliarity.

Chela quickly cut in. "Nanao's upbringing can't be summed up with a pretty little word like *talent*, Mr. Rossi."

"Ah, Michela. Don't I know it. I 'ave eyes, too. Ha-ha! You cannot kill a garuda with talent alone," Rossi replied, a sharp glint flashing in his eyes.

Oliver was watching him intently now. The boy wasn't outright declaring himself their enemy, but he was certainly dangerous.

"But think of the rest of us, eh? With you getting all the attention, everyone else is left out in the cold. It is so lonely out there. I 'ave always 'ated being left out of the fun. The more, the merrier—am I right, my formidable comrades?!"

He practically shouted those last words and turned to face the whole cafeteria. Oliver sensed many, many eyes on their table.

"…What are you trying to say, Mr. Rossi?" he asked stiffly.

"Now, now. Nothing too crazy. We 'ave been at Kimberly for six months, no? I think we should follow our seniors' example and decide among ourselves who is the strongest first-year."

His declaration sent a buzz through the student body. It was an extremely simple theory: So long as there were multiple strong contenders, they would naturally seek out who was *the* strongest of all.

"Of course, the de facto winner is Nanao. I do not 'ave a problem with that. But what is wrong with giving the rest of us the chance to challenge 'er? Some of us wish we could 'ave been there when the garuda went on the attack—including me, of course."

Rossi smiled again, while Oliver glared at him sternly. He'd felt someone's gaze lingering on him and Nanao, stalking them ever since they defeated that garuda. Thus, this suggestion came as no surprise. He'd expected this person to bite eventually.

“We fight, to the last man or woman. Fight to settle once and for all who is the strongest. Otherwise, I will get no sleep at night. So did everyone hear? Come forward and name yourselves, eh? Who wants to join the party?” Rossi shouted, unwilling to let the moment pass. The students’ excitement was palpable.

A girl from a distant table stood up. “I’m in!” the short, blond girl shouted.

Chela’s eyes went wide. “A Cornwallis? Really?”

“Wh-who’s that?”

“Stacy Cornwallis, a relative of mine. Our families have always been quite distant, so we hardly talk at school,” Chela answered with trepidation.

Stacy, however, stood strong, her nostrils flared with excitement.

Next to her, a boy stood up, clearly annoyed. “Seriously? You want in? You were quaking in your boots like the rest of us when that garuda attacked.”

“F-Fay! You’re mistaken! I was just watching really intently!” Stacy claimed. Her tone turned quite childish. This seemed to be her typical demeanor, in contrast with Chela’s prim and proper attitude.

The boy named Fay sighed. “Well, I guess that’s that… I’ll join, too, Mr. Rossi. I won’t make any claims about my strength, but I can’t just sit back and watch this kid throw herself to the dogs,” he said, raising his hand. Rossi chuckled after witnessing their exchange.

“Very good, very good! If you have the spirit, you are welcome to join. Ah yes—those of you who stayed out of the garuda fight, think of this as your chance to redeem your ’onor! Or would you rather spend the rest of the year a whipped dog?”

It was a challenge thinly veiled in friendly concern. A round of voices piped up, signaling their entrance in the competition.

Nanao smiled happily at the rising excitement in the room. “I like how spirited everyone is. A fine display of youthful energy. Might I join as well?” she asked, raising her hand.

Rossi flashed a toothy smile.

“Nanao, you are a true champion. You truly understand the dignity of a king. But what of you, Oliver? Nanao wants to join. Are you content to just sit and watch from your lofty perch?” he asked, needling her tablemate.

After a few moments, Oliver quietly spoke. “…I don’t care about any trophy naming me the strongest first-year, but I also don’t have any reason to back out of a match with my classmates. I’ll join. Are you satisfied now, Mr. Rossi?”

His tone was thorny as he accepted the challenge. Their eyes locked, and Rossi curled his lips in fiendish joy. Now Oliver finally saw the dangerous, pugilistic heart lying beneath Rossi’s friendly exterior.

“…Then there’s no reason I shouldn’t join, either,” Chela added.

“Wha—? Chela?!”

“Wait, you too?!”

Their friends shouted in surprise as the ringlet girl calmly raised her hand.

Rossi whistled, his excitement building upon seeing Chela's indomitable smile. "Lovely! You make me so 'appy. It is important that we have as many participants as possible." He then turned his gaze to a table close to the entrance and raised his voice so they could hear him all the way over there. "And what about you, Mr. Andrews? Always boasting about your skill in sword arts, no? And one of the three who defeated that garuda, besides!"

The long-haired boy Rossi called out by name—Richard Andrews—quietly got to his feet.

"Sorry, but I'll have to pass. My focus is on confronting myself, not others. My mind is made up."

"Mm, I see. Tucking tail and running, eh? I'm disappointed!"

"Say whatever you want. Pardon me."

Andrews ignored the taunt and left the cafeteria. Rossi cocked his head as he watched him go.

"Aw, he left. What a surprise. I was sure he would take the bait."

"Maybe long ago, he would have," Chela said. "I hope you haven't forgotten that I'm participating in your challenge now. Insulting Rick was careless of you."

She glared at him, her earlier smile gone.

Rossi quickly threw up his hands. "Brrr. Forgive me, it was just a bit of banter. I did not mean nothing by it," he apologized, smiling sheepishly. He then quickly returned to the main topic. "Now that we 'ave all our competitors, let us decide on the particulars. A normal tournament would be boring, no? I doubt everyone wants a proper duel on school grounds."

Rossi's tone was thick with sarcasm as he surveyed the competitors. He then withdrew a metal coin from his pocket and held it up for all to see. It was about two times larger than a belc, the common currency of Yelgland.

"So let us 'ave a capture-the-medallion competition. If you are a mage, you should be able to make your own unique medallion. For the next seven days, we will all secretly keep these on our persons. During that time, you are free to pick a fight with whomever you want. If you lose, you must surrender one medallion to the winner. When you have lost all your medallions, you're out. On the last day, the four with the 'ighest number of medallions will duel. It's interesting, no?"

The students looked at one another in surprise. Nanao folded her arms, a conflicted expression on her face.

"Mm. Forgive me, but I do not know how to create a medallion."

"Oliver can teach you. I trust 'e can get it done by the end of today, no? Think of it as a form of insurance. I would love to 'ave an audience for every battle, but that might not be possible everywhere. It is better for everyone if we 'ave some proof of victory."

This made sense to Oliver. If, for example, battles were to take place secretly in the labyrinth, then the winners would need tangible proof of

their victory for the event to proceed smoothly. Of course, that alone wasn't enough to cover all forms of cheating, but Tullio Rossi didn't seem the type to enjoy unbridled chaos. Rossi spent the next five minutes asking each participant their name and scribbling it down on a scroll.

"All participants' names are now recorded. And with that… Begin!" he suddenly announced, lifting the scroll.

The students stiffened.

"What is the matter? Go ahead, fight. Who cares if you cannot make a medallion, eh? You cannot fake the results right 'ere."

Sneering, he stoked the embers. Suddenly, everyone became intensely aware of one another. *Who do I have the greatest chance of beating? Who's the most dangerous to fight? Who would bring the most honor if I defeated them?* Their minds raced with cold-blooded calculations.

"…I know it's sudden, but could I ask for a duel, Ms. Hibiya?"

The first to speak up was a girl from a nearby table.

The students buzzed as Nanao got to her feet without a moment's hesitation. "But of course. Where shall we hold it?"

"We'll probably get in trouble if we do it here, so let's go into the courtyard. I'm guessing the audience will follow us anyway."

Nanao nodded at her proposal, and they walked out of the building together.

Katie stared after them for a bit, dazed, and then quickly stood up in a fluster. "…Huh? Huh?! Wait, they're fighting already?!" she shouted.

"All participants have the right to challenge their opponent to a duel. The earlier, the better. And this girl is quite serious," Chela said, trying to praise the duelist's bravery. She got to her feet, too, then followed the girls, with the rest of the students trailing behind.

A few minutes later, the two duelists stood in the courtyard adjacent to the cafeteria, facing off.

"Starting distance is twenty yards. That's the general rule. You fine with that?"

"No complaints here. However, I still have difficulty using magic. Do you mind if I stick with swordplay?"

"Sure—if you can get close enough, that is," the girl said, grinning confidently. They each drew their athames and cast a spell.

""Securus!""

The blades, imbibed with magic, glowed with a white light. Each cast the antikilling spell not on their own blade, but on *their opponent's*. This was important, as unless they trusted each other implicitly, it was the best way to avoid accidentally dealing lethal blows. If one was lax in their casting, the results would blow up in their face upon first contact.

"Y-you think she'll be okay…?" Katie fretted. "She won't get hurt, will she?"

"It's hard to say," Chela said. "What do you think, Oliver?"

“Her opponent’s goal is clear,” he replied steadily. “She knows Nanao is bad at magic and wants to end the duel from outside the range of her sword arts. And judging from her calm demeanor, she’s likely had some experience in mage duels.”

“…So Nanao’s in trouble?”

Katie crossed her arms, looking worried.

Oliver quietly yet firmly shook his head. “That may be her opponent’s plan, but honestly? She’s misjudged this. She’s really underestimating what Nanao can do with a sword,” he assured her with steady confidence. Then finally, the duel started.

“Begin!” the mediator, a second-year, shouted. Nearly instantaneously, Nanao dashed forward in an almost perfectly straight line. She wasn’t even attempting to play games. The only thing on her mind was closing the distance and cutting through her opponent.

“Impetus!”

Her opponent waited a bit before casting her spell. Realizing that Nanao could dodge if she cast too soon, she let her get very close before unleashing a roaring hammer of wind to send Nanao flying, thus proving an immutable victory.

“Hrmph!”

Consequently, it was some time before she could come to terms with the fact that Nanao had instead sliced horizontally, driving the blow to the side.

“…Huh?”

Presented with the impossible, the girl froze. Fortunately, her instincts kicked in, and she managed to block the follow-up strike, but such a half-hearted defense was meaningless before Nanao. The diagonal slash easily pushed her athame aside, stopping an inch from her neck.

“Mm, forgive me. I instinctually held back. Does this count as a win?” the Azian girl asked the audience. There’d been so little resistance that she hesitated to go through with the cut. Her opponent and the audience stood in dazed silence. Eventually, the mediator came to his senses.

“Th-the winner is Nanao Hibiya!”

Excitement rippled through the crowd. Ignoring them, Nanao sheathed her sword, placed her hands on her opponent’s shoulders, and smiled.

“Let us fight again one day.”

“…Huh? Oh,” the girl muttered weakly, not even realizing she’d lost.

Chela exhaled with awe. “That’s what I expected… No, dare I say, even more magnificent a duel than I could have imagined.”

“Her opponent never stood a chance. Not when she didn’t even know about Nanao’s Flow Cut,” Oliver mercilessly commented. How could she have known, though? This was the first time Nanao had used that technique on a fellow first-year. It was her personal secret technique, similar to the Koutz style’s Flow Cut, yet vastly different—the Double-Handed Flow Cut. It wasn’t for underhanded reasons that she kept it a secret, however. In fact, she’d consulted both Master Garland and Oliver before deciding to do so. If

the other students were to witness this technique during class, it surely wouldn't end well. None of them were capable of copying her, even if they wanted to, and it would only make them feel incompetent despite still being beginners. Who could recover after being defeated in such a manner?

"Just being at the top of the class isn't enough to challenge Nanao anymore," said Oliver. "Only someone stronger than a first-year could hope to stand on equal ground."

"I agree. Honestly, I'm shivering," Chela said, pressing down on her shoulders to steady herself.

Nanao, her first victory in hand, returned to them, and the ringlet girl welcomed her back with a loud proclamation:

"Oliver, Nanao—listen to me. I swear to survive until the final day."

Oliver, Nanao, Katie, Guy, and Pete looked at her in surprise. Normally, Chela watched over them from just a step behind. But now she was bringing her secret feelings to the surface.

"And I suggest you two do the same. Let us three survive as the other participants fall—and then we can have a fair duel. That would be the most exciting conclusion, don't you agree?" Chela asked, although she would not accept a negative answer.

Nanao nodded fiercely.

"I accept. What say you, Oliver?" she responded, then looked over to the boy standing next to her.

Oliver was too conflicted to answer so quickly. All he could remember was the first time he and Nanao had crossed swords—that moment when she realized he was the man of her destiny—and the crystal-clear tears she had shed.

"…Okay. If it's for a competition, I don't mind," Oliver replied after calming himself. No matter his feelings, there was no way he could avoid it forever. He'd have to face her again at least once in their seven years together at the academy. "The final day marks the time of our duel. I'll do my best to survive until then, too."

His response was resolute, and he locked eyes with Nanao.

Chela smiled. "I'm finally joining in, too. How long has it been since I last felt such excitement?" the ringlet girl muttered under her breath, an unprecedented fire alight within her. She was a mage herself, after all. She wasn't about to sit frustrated on the sidelines and watch Oliver and Nanao's little world any longer.

Their first class of the afternoon was magical engineering. This subject, like flying lessons, had been added to their curriculum after the first six months of the school year. Many of the students were elated to experience this new area of study.

"Kya-ha! Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to magical engineering! I'm your teacher, Enrico Forghieri. Nice to meet you! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The moment class began, an old man entered the room, cackling maniacally and holding a lollipop in one hand. The entire class was taken aback.

“I think this is the craziest teacher we’ve had yet,” Guy whispered to his friends, unable to contain himself.

The old man in question licked his lollipop, grinning widely.

“Guy, you’ve never even met this man before! You can’t just—”

“No, he’s right. Don’t let down your guard.”

Katie tried to scold Guy, but Oliver curtly interrupted. They all watched as the old man named Enrico began outlining the class.

“What I teach is, in essence, the basics of our magical society. In other words, the theories and techniques that allow the creation of various magical tools and structures. Without them, magic has no form—we would be no better than flashy tricksters! *Impossible*, you say! *Utterly ridiculous*, you say! *Of course I want the trick box I worked so hard on to be passed down through the generations!*” Enrico shrieked, spreading his arms wide. “Even Kimberly itself is a beautiful trick box left to us by our ancestors! The very first of my line was involved in its construction, and yet there are some parts of this place that are a mystery even to my family. But this is only natural! For unlike the boring creations of nonmagicals, creations of the magical world are alive! There are so many tales of mages being eaten by their own houses that we could use the parchment they’re written on for toilet paper! Kya-ha-ha-ha! How utterly *exciting*!”

The old man’s speech was rapid, his tongue flicking constantly against his candy.

“I’ve devoted many hours to contemplating how to explain this fascinating world to you in the quickest way. Starting from basic theories and working our way up would be the most typical method—but it would also put us all to sleep! The most essential element of learning is that apprehension that makes your palms sweat, followed by the distinct logic and intuition found at its zenith! Please don’t worry—I promise you, my class will *never* be boring!”

Enrico flicked his wand, and instantly, several boxes rose from the corners of the room. The students looked at the mystery items with apprehension.

“Reverse engineering—have you heard of this concept? Put very simply, it involves studying something from the top down. It is a method used to learn the manufacturing process and operating principles of the subject by observing, disassembling, and analyzing a finished product instead of learning the foundational principles and using them to create a product. What I want is for you all to try this for yourselves.”

The instructor swept through the classroom, continuing to lecture.

“You see the four boxes that have appeared in this room, yes? They are all magical traps that will activate in exactly one hour. Disassemble and stop them in time, and you’ll all be fine. Should you fail to do so, however,

you'll be in a bit of trouble. Specifically, your limbs will be ripped from your bodies, and your skin will be melted by an incredibly painful poison. None of this will kill you, however."

The students buzzed with alarm. Enrico curled his lips into a smirk.

"If you don't want this to happen, then do your very best to disassemble the traps. Each box has its own unique mechanism, but don't worry—I'll still give you hints. And here's a bit of advice: I suggest you appoint anyone who has experience in these fields as your leaders. Make the most of your time. Judging by past classes, wasting time is most often the reason for disaster. Now, is everyone ready? Then begin! Look alive, kids! Your lives depend on friendship and cooperation! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Everyone burst into action, acutely aware that this was no longer a simple class.

"Anyone with experience, step forward now! We're running out of time!"

"If we've learned anything from these past six months at Kimberly, it's that our instructors don't exaggerate! Someone really will lose a limb if we fail!"

Oliver and Chela immediately got to barking orders. The students' faces paled upon realizing the danger they were in. Enrico observed as the class descended into a cacophony for a while before raising his voice.

"Your first hint! Magical traps are split into three larger categories: timed, spring-loaded, and timed-spring-loaded. Today, you face three timed traps and one timed-spring-loaded trap. It will make things much easier if you identify them first!"

Oliver ground his teeth. If one of them was a spring-loaded trap, then they had to be extra careful in handling them. They had no choice but to test them individually, he realized, and he began instructing his classmates. Fifty-eight minutes later, the students' desperate work had paid off. They'd succeeded in disarming three of the four traps. But the last one—the timed-spring-loaded trap—was proving to be a headache.

"Damn, still nothing?"

"How the hell do we stop this thing?!"

The students surrounding the remaining box were practically in hysterics. All the while, the hands on the clock ticked away the time. Now fifty-nine minutes had passed. Seeing this, Oliver came to a conclusion.

"Screw it; there's no time. Forget trying to solve it. Let's focus on protecting ourselves!" Oliver ordered, making an executive decision to abandon their previous efforts. The students distanced themselves from the box, scattering like baby spiders.

Pete turned, attempting to follow.

"Ugh…?!"

Suddenly, he felt incredibly dizzy, and his vision warped. In his mind, he knew he had to get away quickly, but his legs were losing feeling. He crumpled to the ground, unable to support the weight of his own body.

"Pete!"

Oliver, noticing something was amiss, jumped back in front of the trap. There wasn't enough time to grab Pete and run. He quickly threw up a barrier spell, then shielded the boy with his own body, covering him with his robe and embracing his friend.

The box exploded. But instead of fire or poison mist, thousands of long, thin, wriggling strands shot out toward the screaming students.

"Ohhh, so close. Missed just one!" Enrico said as joyfully as ever. Pete, who had passed out for a second, slowly opened his eyes.

"Uh… Ah…?"

"Don't move, Pete. Stay still," Oliver whispered, still holding him. Sensing something off about his muffled voice, Pete peered out through a gap in the cloth—and was struck speechless. Dozens of snakes were wriggling violently on Oliver's back, their fangs sinking into his flesh.

"Y-your back…!"

"I'm fine… It just hurts a bit. No big deal…," Oliver said, gritting his teeth through the pain.

Enrico seemed quite impressed. "Ohhh, very hardy, this one. Most first-years pass out, spasming in pain after that many bites. Allow me to join you, then! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

And with that, the old man let himself be bitten from head to toe by the snakes; the rest of the slithering horde went after the students at the other end of the room. Chela and a few others quickly moved to defend themselves with magic, but the snakes slipped through and attacked student after student. Screams filled the air.

"…Indeed, this does hurt quite a bit."

The students were backed against the wall, trying to get as far away from the threat as possible. Of them, only Nanao stepped forward of her own volition. A wave of snakes washed over her, biting her all over. She grimaced but kept walking. Eventually, she reached her friends and scooped up Oliver and Pete.

"Nana…o?"

"Allow me to lend a hand. This is unfortunately all I can do."

Spotting new prey, some of the snakes on Oliver switched targets to Nanao. Seeing this, Katie moved to join them.

"Th-then let me—," she started.

"Stop, Katie!" Chela shouted as Katie tried to pass her. "I know you're resilient, but you need training to withstand such strong pain!"

Chela immediately held her friend back. She was keeping the snakes at bay with a heat-wave spell, and the area behind her was one of the only safe havens in the classroom. There was no way she could let Katie recklessly leave it to join the fight.

"She's right. But that doesn't mean we have to just sit here and be bitten, either!"

"Guy?!"

Chela’s eyes went wide in surprise. The tall boy took out a small potion vial, dumped it over his head, and charged past her into the ball of snakes. He rushed straight toward Oliver, and the snakes switched targets as if drawn to him. “Tonitrus!”

An electric current flowed through Guy’s body, catching all the snakes at once. He brushed off the unconscious reptiles and snorted.

“That’s how we take care of ’em in my neck of the woods. You should’ve told us what was inside the traps earlier, Teach. Wouldn’t have been any reason to be scared, then,” Guy said, glaring at the snakes.

Enrico cackled and raised his wand. “Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! So that’s how you exterminate them, eh? Then allow me to show you my method!”

The old man chanted a spell, and instantly, the writhing snakes throughout the classroom twisted in pain and died. The pests exterminated, he faced the class and dictated their results, still smiling.

“Three of four traps successfully disarmed—a fine effort for your first day, everyone. As a reward, have some candy.” With a flick of his wand, the small lollipops under the podium flew into the dumbstruck students’ hands. “But be certain not to neglect your practice, as I’ll be ramping up the difficulty next time. Fortunately, the majority of you escaped unscathed—but if the opposite were to happen, I’d be the only one able to heal you all. You’d be suffering for quite a bit longer.”

Enrico grinned menacingly.

Katie, now completely fed up, threw her lollipop hard against the ground. “Screw you! This class should be abolished!” she shouted with rage.

Enrico wailed at the sight of the mercilessly broken candy. “Ahhhhh! What have you done, Ms. Aalto? How can you waste a sugary treat? Have you no heart?”

“Oh, you’re one to talk! Your class is built with the intention to hurt us. This isn’t education—it’s torture!” Katie admonished, refusing to back down. Her anger caused the old man looked at her blankly.

“What’s gotten you riled up, Ms. Aalto? You seem to dislike my class, but what specifically is the problem? Look around you. No one’s dead,” he said simply. All throughout the classroom, students were doubled over and moaning in pain, but this didn’t seem to bother him in the least. “This is the fastest teaching method. What do you think is a mage’s greatest advantage over a nonmagical? It is, quite frankly, the fact that we do not die so easily. As long as death is not instantaneous, healing magic can fix most wounds.”

“…!”

“Nonmagicals do not enjoy this benefit, and so they must employ safer teaching methods. They have no choice but to slowly convey knowledge, treating their students like glass and worrying about injury or death. We, however, are different. We can be fixed even if we are broken. Terrible injuries can be shrugged off, allowing us to return to our studies the next day. What is this quality if not an extraordinary boon? It is this advantage

that allows us to attempt outlandish things in the pursuit of faster learning—so long as it doesn't kill us!"

Katie was dumbstruck.

The old man shifted his gaze to Oliver. "Come here, Mr. Horn. The venom is not very strong, but you received too many bites. That will interfere with your next class, I'm sure. An antidote candy won't be enough to purge your system."

Enrico beckoned him over, but Oliver shakily stood up and turned his back on the instructor.

"…I'm fine. I happen to have a very effective ointment for a venom of this strength."

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Have it your way, then. Suck on your candy and be happy! Without the proper antidote, you'll be suffering all afternoon!"

Enrico's childlike laughter troubled Oliver more than the pain coursing through his body.

"A-are you okay, Oliver?! You're much paler than Nanao and Guy!"

"I'm entering the recovery stage, don't worry. More importantly…" In the hall after class, Oliver had applied first aid in the form of the aforementioned ointment and a healing spell. He turned to face his friends. "Pete, mind staying behind? I wanted to talk."

A hush fell over everyone. Eventually, the bespectacled boy nodded with resignation.

"…Go on ahead, guys."

"Pete…?"

"All right. Let's go, everyone," Chela tactfully urged the others.

Katie glanced behind her one last time, a look of worry on her face. Once they were all around the corner, Oliver and Pete began walking down the hall. They came upon an empty classroom, and after closing the doors and confirming they were alone, Oliver broke the silence.

"I'd had a faint suspicion about this since this morning. It wasn't until I touched you earlier that I knew for sure, however."

"……!"

Pete hugged himself in fear. Oliver looked him dead in the eye and asked:

"Your body's a different sex, isn't it?"

The words echoed in the empty classroom. A long silence fell between them—eventually, the bespectacled boy nodded.

"…That's right. Last night, I had a weird dream… And when I woke up, I was like *this*."

Pete took off his robe and undid three of the buttons on his shirt with quivering fingers. His exposed chest revealed, without a shadow of a doubt, budding breasts quite unlike Pete's familiar flat torso.

"I know this might be rude," Oliver continued, "but is it the same… elsewhere?"

"……Y-yeah…"

“Then there’s no question about it. A transformation spell gone rogue or a disguise potion wouldn’t explain this. Your body is too perfectly formed to be the result of some foreign influence. It’s almost as if you’ve had this body your whole life. Such physical idiosyncrasies don’t exist in nonmagical society and are extremely rare even in mages. You’re a reversi.”

Oliver described the phenomenon that was occurring within his friend's body. Suddenly, like a dam bursting, Pete began talking.

"I've felt sick since this morning, too. I have this terrible headache, I get weird dizzy spells, and I get worked up for no reason until I can't focus on the task at hand… Is this all part of…whatever this is?"

"Most likely. I'm not an expert, so I can't say for sure, but it's said that reversi struggle with the ability a lot until they learn to control it properly. Certain factors like their environment can force their sex to change, and the phases of the moon can heavily affect them as well. Now that I think about it, it was a full moon last night. That must have made the perfect marriage with the magical stimulation within Kimberly and your own body."

Oliver walked over to Pete as he explained and buttoned up the boy's loose shirt. His friend's shoulders were quivering ever so slightly. Oliver summoned all the sincerity within himself.

"Just so there's no misunderstanding, this isn't some sudden mutation that only happened because you came to Kimberly," he continued. "The potential must have been in you all along—for example, a hazy concept of your own gender identity, or a feeling of being out of place, even among friends of the same gender. Personal experiences vary, so the only one who can say for sure where it comes from is you."

"……"

Pete searched his memories. He'd never had many friends when living among nonmagicals and was always irritated with himself for not being able to fit in. Was it not just because he had the capability for magic but because of this as well?

"I'm sure you have all sorts of mixed feelings. It'll likely take a while for those emotions to settle. However, let me say one thing: Congratulations, Pete. You've discovered a wonderful potential in yourself."

Pete's eyes went wide as dinner plates at that.

Oliver smiled gently. "For those who desire mastery over magic, being a reversi is undoubtedly considered a gift. Many of history's greatest mages were reversi. The most famous was the great sage Rod Farquois. Not everyone with this trait is at his level, of course, but it'll certainly be a huge boon in your pursuit of the secrets of magic."

"Gift…? You call *this*…a gift?"

"And the greater the gift, the more training is required to master it. This holds true for all fields. Oh, I guess it's hard to imagine if I don't give you an example. Let's see…" Oliver thought for a bit, then drew his wand and indicated for Pete to do the same. "Try casting a lightning spell. That was one of your weaker elements, wasn't it?"

"…? …Tonitrus!" Pete chanted, confused, and aimed the spell at the floor nearby. Light surged at the tip of the wand and created an impact zone ten feet wider than it had been the last time. "What the heck? I've never managed that much power before."

“Males and females excel at different elements. This varies from person to person, so it’s not nearly that simple, but in your case, you’ve gained an increased affinity for lightning magic. I’ll bet a lot else has changed, too, so we should do a quick review later,” Oliver said, making mental notes. Pete stood there in silence as his friend continued. “Do you feel it now, Pete? You’ve gained something incredible. Sure, there’s a lot that can be annoying about it, too, but it’d be such a waste to live your life in fear of this. Consider using this talent, fostering it, and letting it grow. Of course, you’ll need to learn some self-control first, but—”

He suddenly stopped. Sensing a presence from behind, Oliver spun around toward the classroom door.

“Who’s there?!” he barked. Pete blinked, confused.

“Sorry. It’s me,” a neutral-sounding voice quickly responded. The door silently opened, revealing a lone senior student. Their voice was light and beautiful, like a gentle breeze. There was only one person it could belong to.

“Senior Whitrow…?”

“Long time no see, you two. My apologies—I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“…Yeah, I know. If you really wanted to hide, I never would have picked up on your presence,” Oliver said, well aware of the gulf between them.

Carlos Whitrow sighed with relief.

“That’s good to hear. I had a feeling your friend would start showing his true colors soon,” Whitrow said, slowly stepping into the classroom.

Pete scurried behind Oliver’s back.

“I’ve sensed it since the first time we met in the labyrinth. You two were making quite the scene this morning, too. So I followed my hunch, and lo and behold, I was right.” After explaining what they were doing there, Whitrow smiled at the two younger students. “But it seems Mr. Horn has already told you everything I meant to explain.”

Whitrow reached into their robe and withdrew a sheet of paper.

“It’s a pain in the butt, isn’t it? But it’d be best for you to hear everything from your elders.”

Pete cautiously reached out and took the paper with both hands. It was titled with the word *Invitation*.

“Come join us at eight tonight. You’ll find a lot more folk like yourself there.” And with a smile and a wink, Whitrow turned and left.

The rest of the day’s classes passed without any great issue. Freed from their studies, the students kicked back in the Fellowship. The group of five friends sat around a table eating dinner, their eyes on the entrance.

“…Pete’s not coming, huh?” Katie whispered.

“He said he was going to the library to search for some books. I’ll save him some food in case he runs late,” Oliver replied, stuffing a basket he’d bought at the school store with sandwiches and cheese.

“If I can help, feel free to ask me for anything,” Chela said as she continued eating her meal.

“Right, thanks.”

Oliver smiled back. She'd likely picked up on a little of what was transpiring. Even so, she didn't pry, merely extending a helping hand in case she was needed. Her delicacy was a lifesaver.

"…Sorry I'm late."

Pete showed up once they'd finished eating and the cafeteria had become quite sparse. He sat down, looking sullen.

"Yo! You're here, Pete," Guy called out casually. "I dunno what you're researching, but did you discover anything good in the library?"

"There's only so much I can learn on my own, so… Oliver, about that thing… I hate to ask, but could you come with me tonight?"

"Of course. But be sure to eat up before we head over." Oliver quickly nodded, having anticipated this question, and handed his friend the basket of food.

Pete gave a small nod of thanks, then began chewing on a sandwich. Oliver turned back to their friends.

"I can't tell you why yet, but tonight, Pete and I are going down into the labyrinth," he announced. "There should be minimal danger, but if we're not back by ten, then let a trustworthy senior know."

"Understood. Be careful, you two," Chela said, seeing them off with a smile. The memories of the last time they'd entered the labyrinth surfaced in the back of Oliver's mind. He swore to be more careful this time, so as not to expose any of his friends to danger again.

Oliver and Pete followed the invitation's instructions to a classroom on the third floor, spotted the full-length mirror that would serve as the entrance to the labyrinth, and steeled themselves. But all their caution turned out to be meaningless.

"Ah, you're here."

An older boy looked at them as he leaned against the wall.

Oliver was shocked to see a familiar face. "President Godfrey? Wait, are you going to be accompanying us?"

"Don't mind me. I was gonna poke my head in at the event anyway. I also needed to apologize to you two," he said and jumped through the mirror. Then he stuck out a hand and waved them in; Oliver and Pete followed quickly and arrived in a dark labyrinth passageway. Godfrey took the lead as they started walking. "Part of the work of a prefect is periodically checking in on gatherings within the labyrinth. We should've picked up on that kobold hunt and Miligan's subsequent episode and stopped them before they happened, too. So once again, I apologize for our late response."

"No, please… There was no way you could have realized and stopped her when you didn't suspect her at all," Oliver replied. The memory of his battle with the snake-eyed witch was still fresh, and his voice hardened upon remembering that near battle-to-the-death.

Godfrey smiled. "You're much more mature than I was in my first year. Were things rough before you started school here?"

"…I can't say for sure. I don't make a habit of comparing my life to others'," Oliver answered shortly and refused to say more. Most mages didn't like to share details of their past hardships with others so casually anyway.

Sensing he'd touched a nerve, Godfrey shifted his gaze to the other boy. "I hear you come from a nonmagical family, Mr. Reston. How are you finding life at Kimberly?"

"Huh?! Oh, uh, um…"

"Ha-ha, you don't have to sugarcoat it. Every second feels like you're in danger, doesn't it?" The prefect said exactly what Pete had tried to keep inside, then snorted loudly. "That was my first thought, too. And in the five years I've been here, that part of Kimberly hasn't changed a bit. On campus, the instructors act like gods, assigning the most ridiculous and unfair tasks while the students spend their nights in the labyrinth conducting research and fighting battles in secret. I run around every day trying to make this a safer place, but who knows how much good I've actually done."

The marks of the long years of stress seeped into Godfrey's face as he continued:

"At this academy, the pursuit of magical knowledge is prioritized over the students' safety. All we can do is try to arm ourselves with techniques that may help in any eventualities. However, there is some criticism of this system. There's a movement to limit entrance into the labyrinth to only third-years and older. Unfortunately, the opposition is so fierce that it's hard to see any changes being implemented."

"…I can imagine the struggle. Pardon my asking, but are you pro-rights?"

"I'm not sure. Many of my friends are, but personally, I'm a much simpler human. I just think wherever I live should be as peaceful as possible. As for the greater world beyond that, it's beyond my purview. I've got my hands full just dealing with Kimberly, you know?"

Oliver felt a bit of sympathy for Godfrey's self-deprecating mutterings. Here was a guy who wasn't suited to living among all these demons. Kimberly was a place that slowly numbed any natural human emotions over the years. The more you fit in here, the more "eccentric" your mage mentality became. The two older students they'd met before in the labyrinth were a testament to this.

As Oliver considered this, he also realized that Godfrey's uniqueness was why he was a prefect. Oliver looked at the older student, a sliver of awe in his eyes, and Godfrey shifted his gaze back to him.

"Your personality is well-suited to being a prefect, Mr. Horn. If you're interested, you'd be welcome to come join us on a trial basis."

"…I'd be honored," Oliver answered politely, considering the irony of the invitation. The more honorable Alvin Godfrey proved himself to be, the more certain Oliver became that they could never be allies.

“We’re here. This is the meeting place for tonight,” Godfrey said, stopping in front of a blank wall. He spoke the password, and instantly, the rattling stones rearranged to form an entrance. There were no normal ways to enter a room within the labyrinth. Oliver and Pete followed the upperclassman inside.

The room was slightly larger than a standard classroom. In the warm light, about thirty to forty students were conversing casually. On a table were refreshments, and in the back was an empty stage.

“Not bad, right? Go on, help yourselves.”

Oliver and Pete stopped at the entrance, but Godfrey brought them some drinks from the table, which they nervously accepted.

“This is where all students with sex-based magical traits gather. Reversi are obviously a prime example, but there are actually a variety of related traits. Everyone present has insecurities they struggle to talk about openly—and they could all use a friend. You’re very welcome here, Mr. Reston.”

Godfrey smiled warmly. As if to prove his statement, a few other students gathered around them.

“Evenin’!”

“Hey, a newbie! A newbie!”

“Don’t scare the poor kid! You, in the glasses. I take it you’re the one?”

Surprisingly, a bunch of older students started calling out to Pete. It was difficult to discern their gender from their clothes and mannerisms alone.

Pete timidly took a step back, so Oliver spoke up instead. “As you’ve guessed, this is Pete Reston, a first-year who’s just recently learned he’s a reversi. I’m his friend, Oliver Horn. He’s visiting tonight in the hopes of receiving some advice going forward. I hope you’ll help us.”

Oliver delivered his greeting politely. A silence fell over the older students—and then they burst into laughter.

“So stiff! Stiff as a board you are, Oliver!”

“Is there a fifth-year inside this guy or what?”

“Relax, Mr. Horn. No need to be so nervous. We’re all friends here.”

“…Erk…”

The unexpected heckling struck Oliver silent.

A large, feminine-looking student placed a gentle hand on his head. “You’re acting strong for your friend’s sake, aren’t you? Good boy, good boy.”

They ruffled his hair like he was a sulking small child, which threw Oliver for a loop. The other students began turning their attention to the stage.

“Oh, time for the main event. Everyone, that’s enough chattering.”

The students shut their mouths, their attention on the stage where two figures stood. Oliver’s eyes went wide when he recognized one of them.

“Brother?”

His copper-haired cousin was standing on the stage, holding a large string instrument. In front of him was the prefect who’d organized this

event, Carlos Whitrow, who spoke to the crowd with their characteristic beautiful voice.

“Good evening, everyone. Thank you for coming tonight.”

The audience cheered. It was like they were at a concert for a famous singer. Oliver and Pete couldn’t hide their confusion.

“We have some new folks here tonight, so let me take a little time to reiterate just what this group is about. Everyone here, including me, possesses sex-based magical traits. We all have our fair share of problems. But it’s okay. Here, you can find help and support. Lay all your troubles out for us. If you’re a bit shy, be prepared to get a visit from me later.”

Carlos’s gaze flicked over to Pete; the bespectacled boy nervously returned the silent greeting. Carlos smiled gently, then readdressed the audience.

“But first comes our performance. I, Carlos Whitrow, will be your singer. Accompanying me is someone I’m sure you’re all very familiar with: the famous contrabass player Gwyn Sherwood. Are you ready to have your ears blown away?”

“”””””CARLOS! WE LOVE YOUUU!”””””””

The younger students in the front row all cheered. Carlos blew them a kiss.

“The volume is appreciated, my little kittens. Let’s begin, then. Our first number!”

On their signal, the contrabass player behind them bowed a heavy, solemn note. That alone was enough to capture all the ears in the room—and then Carlos began to sing.

“Wha—?”

In an instant, Oliver and Pete were swept off their feet.

The impossibly clear vocals echoed not in their minds, but in their chests. The sound flowed through their bodies, filling every inch from head to toe and spilling out as tears. The two boys became so focused on the song that they nearly forgot to breathe.

“Isn’t Carlos’s singing just amazing? Your first piece of advice: Bring three handkerchiefs to these meetings.”

A nearby older student who was dabbing at their eyes with a handkerchief offered Oliver and Pete handkerchiefs of their own. The two boys took them and did the same.

“*Sniff…* Oliver, this…,” Pete managed to squeak out.

“It’s an enchanted voice, yes. But it’s not a type of charm. It’s much purer, much cleaner—”

It was all Oliver could do to make that hazy discernment; even he couldn’t grasp the truth behind Carlos’s voice. Most of all, the more boorishly suspicious he became, the more beautiful Carlos’s voice sounded. Before he knew it, five songs had passed in the blink of an eye. Carlos looked out into the crowd, a kind glimmer in their gaze, as the audience basked in the bliss of the faint remaining echoes.

“Thank you for listening. Without you all, I wouldn’t be able to enjoy singing. But I know everyone’s been waiting to chat and mingle among yourselves, so now is that time. I’ll be right down to join you, so don’t hold back!”

A storm of applause followed Carlos and the accompanying contrabass player off the stage. Once they were gone, the students began chatting among themselves as they wiped at their moistened eyes.

“Hee-hee-hee! Don’t worry, we’re all friends here, Mr. Reston.”

“There’s no need to be embarrassed. Everyone’s in the same boat.”

“Let’s start with those of us who, like you, woke up one morning to find their dick gone.”

“Oh, tell me about it! At first, I thought it had shriveled up and tucked itself inside me—”

A wave of students surrounded them, with everyone talking at the same time. Pete was understandably overwhelmed, but Oliver stood by and didn’t interfere. He no longer felt any reason to be on guard around this group.

Two hours later, the event finished, and Godfrey led them back to the campus. Oliver and Pete bid farewell to him, then walked along the path to the dorm in the night.

“So…how was it? What’d you think?” Oliver asked hesitantly. Pete snorted.

“You were there. You saw what happened… They’re all good people. I feel stupid for being so nervous and freezing up.”

“I see. That’s good to hear.”

“I got a lot of great advice, too. I feel a little more confident about dealing with this now. Not superconfident, mind you, but I think I’ll manage.”

The bespectacled boy balled his fists.

After a bit, Oliver spoke up again. “…What do we do about our room?”

“…!”

“Like they said at the event, you can report your status to the academy and be granted a private room. I think that’d be easier, at least when it comes to your everyday needs. But personally—”

Before Oliver could continue, Pete raised a hand.

“…You don’t have to say any more.”

“Mm?”

“I know—I know I can barely take care of myself at this academy… I don’t even want to think of spending the night alone at Kimberly. So please let me continue to be your roommate for the time being. Please.”

Pete stopped and looked seriously at Oliver. Relief flooded into Oliver’s expression.

“I’m really glad you said that. It’ll be easier to help you if we’re in the same room, too. If anything strange comes up, just let me know. No need to feel shy.”

“…Thanks. But, um…”

Pete stumbled over his next words. Oliver cocked his head, and his friend reddened and looked away.

“…I’m putting up a curtain between our beds.”

As the two boys proceeded toward the dorm, six instructors gathered in a secret room, shrouded in the deepest darkness of the campus.

“Yo, everyone here?”

“You’re late, Vanessa.”

Esmeralda glared icily at the magical biology instructor as she entered the room without any sense of guilt. The headmistress and the other four instructors were sitting at a round table in the center of the room.

“Sorry, sorry. I was busy catching this fella right here.”

She tossed the mass she was carrying over her shoulder to the floor. It was a man bandaged from head to toe and covered in a ragged cloak, moaning in pain.

“Unh… Mmf…”

“He’s a pretty good locksmith. Managed to get through two barriers before I arrived. Shoulda known he’d end up like this, though. Congrats on the wasted effort, I guess?” Vanessa explained with contempt, then turned back to the other five. “So what now? Make him sing?”

“We’re missing our best conductor, unfortunately. Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“I haven’t much hope. He seems more likely to expire before he croaks his first note.”

The two elderly instructors, Enrico and Gilchrist, offered their opinions, and everyone laughed, albeit a little awkwardly.

“…Won’t…get away with this…,” the man crawling on the ground muttered, glowering at the demonic figures surrounding him. “…You won’t get…away with this forever. Your end is nigh, heretics! My body may expire, but that just brings our god closer to Earth! He will rain down a crueler punishment than any of you can imagine!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m tired of hearing that one. Seriously, you’re gonna make me go deaf. So do I torture him, Headmistress?” Bored, Vanessa asked for direction.

The answer came without any hesitation.

“No. Eliminate him.”

“You got it.”

Immediately, Vanessa reached out an arm. Her muscles exploded in size, creating a palm that was large enough to cover an entire human. She snatched up her prey, and a chill went up the man’s spine as he sensed the warm, wet breathing on the back of his neck. There was a mouth inside the hand.

“Eep! Ah! God! Oh god! Gyaaaaaaah!”

The sound of teeth grinding down flesh and bone joined his screams. A few moments later, the hand was empty. Vanessa returned her arm to its normal size and moved to the table, frowning.

“Blech, that was nasty. Why are these Order of the Sacred Light guys always so sinewy?”

“It must be the diet they’re beholden to. Gnostics are always so unhealthy.”

Enrico crossed his arms, troubled. Vanessa wiped the remaining blood from her hand.

“Well, let’s get this show on the road. It’s about Darius, right?”

She sat down and suddenly dove into the main topic. Of the six people around the table, an extraordinarily quiet man draped in a loose robe was the first to softly speak up.

“It’s been four months since he disappeared. It’s safe to say he’s dead.”

“Oh, how tragic,” the witch sitting next to Vanessa added. She was small, and her black outfit was worn with age. Esmeralda shook her head.

“That doesn’t matter. What does matter is the cause. Anyone have any clues?” she asked without a shred of sorrow for their lost ally. Vanessa shrugged.

“Not a one. He was too strong to just disappear into the labyrinth and die. And the timing doesn’t seem right for him to have been consumed by the spell.”

“In other words, someone killed him! That must be it! Kya-ha!”

The old man, Enrico, laughed his mechanical laugh. Vanessa didn’t try to hide her annoyance.

“Don’t ignore how urgent this situation is, old fart. Then again, you have a point. Which means it’s down to figuring out who killed Darius.”

A predatory glint flickered in her eyes as she looked around the room.

“Ain’t many who could have done the deed. The six of us, and… Who else? Young Garland? Oh, and that McFarlane bastard, too. He’s a mysterious one, he is. But I think we can rule you out, Headmistress. If you killed him, there’d be no point in hiding it. So…including me, how many suspects do we have?”

Vanessa twisted her lips into a sneer. Opposite her, Gilchrist snorted.

“This is all pointless conjecture. There’s no guarantee that Darius was killed in one-on-one combat.”

“Of course, of course. So you think a bunch of skilled instructors ganged up on him? And if *you* happened to be leading them, why, Darius wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

Vanessa’s tone was taunting.

Gilchrist shot her a piercing glare, and suddenly, a flower vase in a corner of the room exploded. Even as the pieces scattered, no one turned to look.

“Hmph. I wouldn’t be surprised if one of us was a traitor—but the fact is, that doesn’t line up with reality. I’m sure we’d all do much better in eliminating an opponent, no?”

The elderly Enrico smiled knowingly. The black-clad witch seated next to Vanessa innocently cocked her head and remarked, “Aw, if it were me, I’d keep dear Darry’s corpse by my side forever.”

She spoke of a fate worse than death.

Vanessa shook her head. “But if we look elsewhere, we don’t have any suspects. Or what, did one of the students kill him?”

She meant it as a bad joke, but Esmeralda quietly opened her mouth.

“If, by some chance, a student did kill him, that would mean Darius was never fit to be a Kimberly instructor,” the headmistress said. “He was rightly culled. That’s all.”

“Ain’t that the truth. But what if that’s not what happened?” Vanessa was enjoying herself now.

Esmeralda clapped once, then addressed the room. “Then at least one of you has sided against me. If you’ve made your peace with that, then nothing else needs to be said.”

The mages understood: She’d never cared about finding the killer. *This* was the real reason the headmistress had summoned them.

“Yeaaah, count me out,” someone said lazily.

Everyone silently looked to the ceiling—there stood an aloof-looking man, his trademark ringlet hair draped over his shoulders and not a speck of dust on his smart, prim outfit.

“You’re back? You sure like being upside-down, don’t you?” asked Vanessa.

“And you lot just love coming up with evil schemes. I wish you would at least be a little surprised. It was quite an ordeal getting this far without being noticed.”

“Idiot. Who’d be surprised to see you on the ceiling at this point? It’d be more shocking if you politely knocked on the door,” Vanessa spat and shrugged.

The old man at the table cackled with glee. “Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! More importantly, McFarlane, you aren’t a member of this group. Naughty, naughty. You may be the headmistress’s old friend, but even that doesn’t give you the right to intrude here.”

As if on cue, the five instructors focused their malice on the man. Any normal mage would have had a heart attack from the pressure, but McFarlane took it in stride. He smiled.

“Ah, you are completely right, of course, Master Enrico. Then would you like to try and remove me by force, like you did with that Gnostic?”

Despite his laid-back attitude, he didn’t back down from a fight. The room, already fit to burst with venom, nearly exploded.

“Quit stirring the pot with your foolish games, Theodore.”

Esmeralda’s icy tone dumped a bucket—no, a lake’s worth of water onto the fire, instantly extinguishing the tension. Even Theodore, the man on the ceiling, straightened up.

“Forgive me, Headmistress. It’s just my nature to stir the pot when it’s too settled.”

“And I don’t expect you to change. Now sit. That’s an order.”

“As you wish.”

The man obeyed her order and sat down on the ceiling. He was mostly respectful, with only a hint of cheekiness—and a tinge of affection.

CHAPTER 2

Exploring the Labyrinth

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Six months had passed since the beginning of the school term, and so naturally, each class was beginning to stratify. The experienced drew ahead of the inexperienced, of course, but even among those who began studying at the same time, a gap was beginning to form. This was especially prevalent in subjects where the students were forced to compete directly with one another.

"Hyah!"

"Uwah!"

The two students' enthusiasm filled the great room. Their classmates formed a circle around them and watched as Guy boldly landed a strike on his opponent's temple. Garland, the referee, raised an arm.

"One point. The match is over. Mr. Greenwood, you show some talent, but you seem to treat the sword more like a club."

"Yessir. Sorry—I grew up rough."

"No, I applaud your fast decision-making. It's much better than constantly having your tail tucked between your legs. But if you don't refine your technique more, I'm afraid you'll never stand a chance against an older student. Don't let this victory satisfy you. I suggest you work on your technique as soon as you can."

Guy nodded. Garland then shifted his attention to Guy's opponent.

"If you had seen through that coarse technique, Mr. Martin, you would have had a good chance of victory. It's not a bad idea to play defense, but once you let the pressure get to you, that chance is gone. Go gain some further experience—you'll build confidence that way."

"Yes, sir…"

The student named Martin looked down at his feet in frustration.

The sword arts instructor smiled encouragingly, then spoke again. "Okay, next. Mr. Hughes and Mr. Reston, step forward."

"Yes, sir!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

The two students walked up. The bespectacled boy's face was stiff with nerves. Oliver observed him from the sidelines. *This is less than ideal. He's got decent fight in him, but he's still a bit too jumpy.*

"Begin!"

Almost as soon as Garland gave the signal, Pete dashed forward. *Uh-oh*, thought Oliver. Pete's actions made it far too obvious what his aim was.

"Dyah!"

They clashed, and Pete parried his opponent's athame. Then he pressed forward into a stab. This was a basic sword arts combination. And thanks to Pete's diligent practice, his movements were quick and snappy.

"…Uwah?!"

Unfortunately, he was so focused on his attack that he wasn't looking at the ground. A Gravestone shot up beneath Pete's feet, and he toppled forward. When he got back up, flustered, his opponent's athame was already in his face.

"One point. The match is over. I appreciate you going on the offensive, Mr. Reston, but it seems your effort was rather for naught. Don't rush the fight. Expand your vision."

Garland offered his advice based on the results of the match. Once he was done instructing Pete, he turned to the opposing student.

"Excellent job reading your opponent's initial aggression and using Gravestone, Mr. Hughes. But remember: Don't look at the ground. If Mr. Reston had been more composed, he would have noticed your ploy. Practice your spatial magic so that you can activate your magic without averting your gaze."

"Yes, sir."

The boy named Hughes nodded and exited the arena. His friend clapped him on the back and said, "No sweat, right?"

"Beating an overachiever from a nonmagical family isn't exactly worth bragging about, though," Hughes replied.

"…!" Pete's shoulders twitched.

Unlike the people who had made fun of Katie, these two students didn't mean any particular harm. Hughes wasn't trying to belittle his opponent; he was just chatting honestly with his friend. This made the sting even worse for Pete. He wasn't even worth bullying—in other words, he'd never even been on his opponent's radar.

"I want to train more!"

Unable to wait for lunch break, Pete gathered his friends and blurted out those words as soon as class ended. Oliver and the others were taken aback, but Pete pressed on.

"I've tried training on my own, but the gap between me and everyone else keeps widening. I know it's a pipe dream to try and beat someone more experienced, but I can't stand being belittled by the people who started learning this stuff at the same time as me." Pete ground his teeth.

Oliver had had a feeling this was the case. Pete was always listening to Garland's instructions with the most intensity, and he never slacked on practicing what they were taught. And yet, everyone else seemed to be leaving him in the dust. It was no wonder he was so frustrated.

"In the next class, we're going to finally start incorporating spells into our duels. If I can't even win with just a sword, how am I going to fare then? If I don't do something now, I'll stay weak forever."

He looked down, depressed. Oliver and Chela nodded in unison.

“I figured you were having trouble. If you want to boost your skills, then of course I’ll help you out.”

“Indeed. I’m glad you came to us for this, Pete. Don’t worry: I’ll take it upon myself to personally train you into an excellent Rizett-style swordsman,” Chela promised with a determined glint in her eyes.

Oliver furrowed his brow. “…Mm? Wait a minute, Chela. Considering past classes, shouldn’t Pete continue to be trained within the Lanoff style?”

“But that’s what’s causing him trouble, isn’t it? He should explore other styles early on to see if they’re a better match.”

“You have a point… But judging from today’s class, Pete’s technique isn’t at a level where we can determine what he’s suited to. He should avoid any easy shortcuts. If he learns the Rizett style before mastering the basics, the techniques he’s learned so far will only backfire and trip him up.”

“I disagree. In fact, it’s my opinion that the current newcomer curriculum is too biased toward the Lanoff style. And if I may be so bold… this policy of just teaching everyone the Lanoff style while ignoring their personal quirks is akin to mental stagnation, a mortal sin for mages.”

A fierce debate swirled between them, leaving Pete stranded in the middle. Katie and Guy exchanged awkward grins.

“Here we go again…” Katie groaned.

“Yep,” Guy agreed. “Look, Nanao. This here’s a classic dispute that you’ll find among any group of people. It’s one of the three great arguments of magical society: Which of the three basic styles is the best?”

Nanao leaned forward in earnest after hearing this explanation. Oliver and Chela’s debate was heating up, and they showed no regard for the fact that everyone was staring at them.

“You can’t say that’s unconditionally true,” Oliver countered. “For beginners, the most important thing is to get a rock-solid grip on the basics. If they start with the offensive-leaning Rizett style, it’ll just lead them to take a more aggressive approach. This might lead to more victories earlier on, but it’s easy to be duped by a style that relies on gambling. Thus, it’s totally possible to overlook big deficits in one’s technique.”

“That’s an issue with the instructor, not the style,” Chela countered. “Furthermore, isn’t Pete seeking a tangible sense of improvement rather than rock-solid instruction? The longer he goes without a win, the more likely he will burn out before he even masters the basics.”

They argued with equal ferocity, and there was no end in sight. As they continued, the Azian girl muttered to herself, “…Perhaps, if a conclusion cannot be reached, we should split the difference, and I’ll teach Pete—”

“No way!”

“Absolutely not!”

Oliver and Chela shot her down in total unison, as if they hadn’t been arguing only seconds ago. There was no debating it: Nanao’s swordsmanship couldn’t be replicated by anyone else.

“I get what you’re both saying. So why don’t you both take turns giving lessons?” Katie suggested.

“Chela can teach him offense, and Oliver can teach him defense. Why not split the work that way?” Guy added. Neither of them could stand by and watch this anymore.

Oliver, realizing his own immaturity, coughed. “If we can decide on a direction beforehand, I don’t mind. I agree, Chela; that feeling of improvement is important. In a sense, this is good timing, since we’re about to incorporate spells soon.”

Chela nodded silently in agreement. Oliver turned back to Pete.

“Pete. What I’m going to teach you now is a way to win a magical duel without relying on any one sword arts style.”

“Huh…?”

Unable to understand what Oliver was saying, Pete was clearly confused.

Oliver continued. “Winning a duel with sword and spells—let me ask you: How do you think that’s achieved?”

Pete thought for a minute, then gave his best answer. “…By besting your opponent with sword arts techniques?”

“Yes, that’s one way. Anything else?”

“…Spells?”

“That’s a second way. Anything else?”

He repeated the question, but Pete couldn’t think of an answer. So Oliver inched closer to the core of his speech.

“There is a third way to win a magical duel other than the two you’ve stated. Draw your athame.”

Oliver drew his as well and squared off against Pete. They were close, about five feet apart. Once again, Oliver asked him a question.

“What would you do at this distance?”

“…Attack with my sword.”

Oliver nodded at this answer, then took six steps back. “Then what about at this distance?”

“Cast a spell, obviously,” Pete answered instantly. If his opponent was outside the range of his sword, then as a mage, this was the natural answer.

Oliver nodded again, then took a few steps forward. “What about at this distance?”

“…!”

This time, Pete didn’t reply so quickly. At first glance, it was a very awkward distance; it was too wide to be considered within the one-step, one-spell distance they’d been taught. Yet it wasn’t so wide that a single-incantation spell would be guaranteed to land. Any attack would be met with a swift counter.

“Imagine we’re in the middle of a duel and attack me from your position. Be serious,” Oliver instructed.

After a little hesitation, Pete drew his athame with conviction. “Tonitru—?!”

His incantation was interrupted at the very last syllable by a sword tip pointing directly at his throat. He could say no more. Oliver stepped away from the speechless boy and sheathed his sword.

“Understand, Pete? Just now, you didn’t compete and lose with sword arts techniques. Nor did your spell flinging come up short. You didn’t have time to execute either.”

“……”

“In other words, this is the third method for victory: The side that understands the battlefield’s boundaries is the winner. You can see this quite often in real battles.”

The one-step, one-spell distance was an easy phrase, but there was no official measurement for that distance. It changed depending on each person’s speed, the length of their arms and swords, and even the stances they took. In this case, Oliver’s speed meant he was faster than Pete’s ability to predict his next move, thanks to his Lanoff technique.

“In all magical duels, you could say that understanding distance is a basic skill as well as a secret technique. The moment you miscalculate the one-step, one-spell distance, even an expert becomes vulnerable to a lethal blow. On the other hand, if you target and succeed at reading this distance, it’s your ticket to victory. This is the same logic that caused Badderwell, who was famous for his quick draw, to lose.”

“……”

“I won’t ask you to perfectly calculate this distance every time. This skill is an age-old theme of magical duels, and obviously, I haven’t perfected it, either. But there’s a world of difference between those who are and aren’t aware of it. Understand? If you’re up against someone you can’t beat in sword arts or spells, aiming for this opening will give you a chance at victory.”

“……!”

Pete’s expression changed once the pieces clicked into place.

Oliver smiled, then continued. “For your training, I’m going to be teaching you this. Some people call it the border dance. It won’t be easy, but if you master it, I promise it’ll be a powerful weapon. Is that okay with you?”

Pete instantly nodded. He begged Oliver to go again, so he could build up even a little more experience before their next class. They drew their swords when an aloof voice caught their attention.

“What is this? More roundabout methods, eh?”

Startled, Pete spun around. His eyes landed on the classroom entrance, where a lone boy was leaning against the door. There was no mistaking his unique accent and lanky build.

“Mr. Rossi…?”

Oliver addressed the newcomer suspiciously.

Instead of giving a light wave in response, Rossi spoke again. “I ’eard everything. Our friend with the glasses wants to be strong, does ’e not?”

“……”

“Then I will teach you. My way is much faster. Not so fussy. You want to come over to my side?”

He beckoned to Pete with his hand. Oliver and Chela quickly strode in front of him, blocking the way.

“…You’re interrupting our session. Please keep your invitations to yourself.”

“Indeed. I don’t approve of eavesdropping, Mr. Rossi.”

They kept Rossi back with sharp glares and terse warnings.

Rossi just chuckled. “Such reliable allies you ’ave to defend you. But is that what you want, my friend?”

“……!”

“Feels nice, no? Protected like a princess, leaving all the danger to others. So lucky to be blessed with such kind friends right after starting at the big, scary academy. But do you really think such a person can ever truly be strong?”

Pete just stood there, lost for words.

Oliver, standing in front of him, lowered his voice to a growl. “Take your stupid antagonizing comments elsewhere. Or would you like me to take your medallion here and now, Mr. Rossi?”

His words were laced with venom. If they really did come to blows, he wouldn’t mind at all. Katie and the others tensed, sensing a fight was about to break out. But Rossi raised his hands and let it go.

“Ha-ha! Thanks, but no thanks. I will be late for class. See you, my bespectacled friend. If you ever change your mind, you know where to find me, eh?” he said nonchalantly before turning around.

Silence returned to the empty classroom, leaving the six of them feeling somewhat miffed.

Rossi’s intrusion had thrown them off, but it was true that class was about to begin soon. The six of them ran out of the building and headed for the

outdoor workspace. They formed up around the last remaining workbench, and a few seconds later, the magical biology instructor appeared. A unique tension ran through the class.

“Today, you’ll be learning about fairies. Well, I say fairies, but it’s a very broad term.”

Vanessa Aldiss pointed to the rectangular barrier set up behind her. Inside the glass-like structure were humanoid creatures with translucent wings buzzing all over. There were too many of them to count.

“Species-wise, they’re as diverse as birds. The category includes creatures from sparrows to vultures. Size-wise, fairies range from barely visible to the naked eye to almost twenty inches tall.”

She rapped on the barrier with the back of her hand as she spoke. The fairies didn’t seem to respond, which quickly clued Oliver in to what kind of barrier it was. Most likely, it was a one-way barrier constructed to allow people to view captive creatures from the outside.

“Most fairies are also humanoid in shape. And yet, the tiny demi-humans known as pygmies are classified differently despite so many similarities between the two. Can anyone tell me why? Ms. Aalto, demi-human lover?”

Vanessa singled out the curly-haired girl with obvious mocking intent.

Katie answered her stiffly. “…It’s because the structure of their bodies is completely different. The biggest difference is that fairies don’t have ‘brains.’ The neural network that emits from their body acts as a replacement, but their cognitive abilities differ highly from that of humans. It’s said their sense of ‘self’ is very faint, and they are more akin to bees or ants.”

She delivered her response without stumbling, and the instructor gave a fake gasp of amazement.

“What a surprise! You have enough sense to separate emotion from reality. Anyway, she’s right. They might look like humans, but their insides and structure are totally different. It’s totally obvious once you dissect them.”

Vanessa shrugged, then turned back to the students.

“Every year, I make it a point to teach first-years about fairies. Give you a little taste of fear. Still, they’re darn cute, aren’t they?”

None of the students blindly accepted this statement, however. In just six short months, they’d quickly learned that this instructor didn’t love living creatures at all.

“Most fairies are attractive to the eye. But that’s not a coincidence. Cuteness is a legitimate survival tactic. It catches you off guard, makes you want to care for them unconditionally—a huge evolutionary advantage. As a defense mechanism against predators, it can sometimes even be more effective than poison or quick reflexes.”

Oliver nodded in agreement. There were a fair few magical creatures that used “cuteness” as a weapon. The more developed ones could cast a version of a charm and even bend other creatures to their will.

“These li’l guys have evolved into these forms on purpose. But cuteness alone doesn’t cut it. If you manage to avoid being eaten, then you’ve gotta find food for yourself. In other words, they have a predatory side as well. That’s what you’re gonna see today.”

Vanessa grinned, exposing her canines, and pulled out a cage from underneath a nearby workbench. Inside was a live rabbit. She opened the cage and grabbed it forcefully by the back of the neck, then tossed it into the barrier. Apparently, this wasn’t the type of barrier that prevented things from the outside getting in, so the rabbit effortlessly fell into the multitude of fairies.

The swarm, upon registering the presence of a new creature, instantly began to transform. Their fingers and toes grew sharp; fangs sprouted from their wide mouths; and the beating of their wings grew to a fever pitch. Their cute appearance from a few seconds ago was gone. Their instincts fully honed, the fairies descended upon the rabbit.

“Impressive change, right? This is what’s called a gregarious phase. Under the right conditions and when the population density of their habitat exceeds a certain value, this aspect manifests. They abandon their cute exteriors for predatorial forms that are specialized for successful hunting. When they’re like this, they’ll even attack and eat humans.”

The horde of fairies sliced and chomped into the defenseless rabbit. The students silently gulped as they watched its last moments. It was too gruesome a sight to be called the work of nature.

“There’s nothing to be shocked about. You’re all the same, aren’t you? You feel stronger than you are in groups, and when you feel threatened, you do all you can to survive. This is incredibly natural for living things. Because —”

She stopped her speech and spread her arms before the barrier. The students tensed, unsure of what she was about to do. The next moment, her arms began to crackle and transform. Her skin expanded from the pressure, revealing a sinister physique. From her hands grew long talons that were fused with her fingers.

“…!”

The familiar sight made all of Oliver’s hair stand on end. Immediately, faster than the students’ eyes could follow, Vanessa swung her arms—and with that, the fairies swarming the rabbit were shredded into thousands of fleshy bits and scattered around the barrier.

“—you all know that this is what happens if you fail. Everyone works their hardest, because their lives depend on it. In this way, millions of creatures accumulate many different sorts of survival methods in their genealogy. And unraveling them is what magical biology’s all about.”

Vanessa continued where she left off, showing off her bizarre, bloodied arms to the students. The stench of blood and guts gave her words a brutal realism.

"There are lots of cute creatures out there. But there's not a single one that's just cute, without any strings attached. Don't make light of these creatures, folks. If you don't want to die, then throw your everything into studying them. For powerless kids like you, that's what living is for now."

Once class was over, the six friends headed for the cafeteria. Katie's rage was endless.

"Oh my god! What the hell is wrong with that instructor?!" she shrieked, not caring about all the people staring, and viciously bit into her pie. None of her five friends tried to pacify her. It would have been more worrying if she didn't fly into a rage.

"Let's say, for argument's sake, that she had a legitimate point underneath all that garbage. But why did she need to feed the fairies a live rabbit and then proceed to slaughter them?! She could've just explained it all in words! She just wanted to scare us!"

"…That was intense, yeah. Don't really feel like eating now. Right, Nanao—?"

"Mm?"

Guy played with his fork in midair, then looked at Nanao to see her cheeks stuffed with food.

He grinned wryly and shook his head. "…Nah, never mind. You're as tough as ever, girl."

"I still have my appetite, too! Guy, I'm taking this!" Seeing that her friend wasn't feeling hungry, Katie stole the meat loaf from his plate.

"Ah, hey! My meat loaf…!" Realizing the danger he'd put himself in, Guy began eating again.

Chela chuckled. "You've all gotten so much stronger since you started here. What about this afternoon, though? We have time to visit some clubs."

The group exchanged glances.

"I wish to see broomsport for myself. It would be a good chance to employ my new partner."

"You had a *lot* of invites to those groups, Nanao. I'll join you, then."

"Mm? You fly, Chela?"

"I'm confident in my skills, but I'll just be observing. I can't wait to see how the broomriding scene will change once you've joined the club." Chela's eyes sparkled with anticipation.

Next to her, Pete was poking at his pudding. "…I'm gonna visit the alchemy-related clubs," he said. "It'll help me practice for class, and I heard they have lots of students from nonmagical families, so they should be a bit friendlier."

“Oh, good idea,” said Oliver. “In alchemy, effort is pretty much directly related to results. I think it’s perfect for you.” He smiled and nodded at Pete.

Guy sat back in his chair and pondered. “I’ve already checked out the horticulture clubs, so I think I’ll go watch Nanao, too. How ’bout you, Katie?”

“I’ve got a whole bunch on my list. First, I’ll check out the Demi-Human Research Society, and then of course the Magical Creature Club. Oh, and there are a bunch of civil-rights-related groups—” Katie counted off more clubs than her fingers could handle.

Guy shook his head with chagrin. “Guess you’re on your own, too, then. And you, Oliver?”

“Mm…”

Oliver felt the group’s eyes on him, and so he looked back. Then almost as he expected, he found himself staring into Nanao’s eyes, which were brimming with hope.

In the end, everyone except Pete and Katie went to check out the broomriding club. There were four practice grounds on campus—one for the daily practice of each of the four official academy teams. The gang decided to visit the field for the Wild Geese team.

“Ohhh! Samurai girl, you came!”

Some older students, a boy and a girl, spotted the four of them from the air and landed excitedly.

The Azian girl stepped forward to thank them for the welcome. “My name is Nanao Hibiya. May I have the honor of observing your practice?”

“We’d be crazy to say no! Come on! Bring your friends!”

The girl circled around the group and urged them toward the practice field. Once she’d sat them on the observing bench, she waved to her teammates and gave them a sign. Then the boy proceeded to explain.

“Let me begin with a summary, then. Any sport that involves broomsticks is considered part of ‘broomsport.’ Within that category are three major types of games, known as the Big Three.”

The boy spoke as if he’d done this a thousand times. Simultaneously, large rings began to rise all over the field. The players also set off, circling the elliptical field at a high speed atop their long brooms.

“First, you’ve got group obstacle courses! The floating rings are the course, and you have to fly through them in order, or you’re disqualified. Other than that, the faster, the better!”

Behind their guide, the team gave a demonstration. Then the girl pushed him from behind and leaned forward.

“Second is a one-on-one duel between two people flying in a figure-eight shape!” she said. “In this one, you get some gnarly collisions. The players use special clubs to try and knock each other off, so it seems simple, but it’s actually really involved!”

As she explained, two players broke off from the group that was circling the field. They faced each other from opposite ends, then flew in arcs toward each other, rising high. They drew their weapons from their waists, then rocketed toward the ground, barely avoiding a collision. The heavy sound of clubs clashing echoed, and Nanao cheered.

“Ohhh! They fight in midair?!”

“Intense, isn’t it? This is real broomsport!” Chela joined in on the cheering.

Emboldened, the older girl resumed her speech.

“And third, the star of broomsport and everyone’s favorite: team battles!”

The players split into two teams, assembled formations, and faced off. They glared at each other for a few seconds and then clashed head-on. With clubs in both hands, the players tried to knock the opposing team off their brooms. It seemed like a real battle was going on up there.

“The quickest explanation is that it’s like the second type, but with teams of thirteen!” the boy added. “There are a bunch of detailed rules, but the main point is if you knock down the enemy’s leader, you win. Fight, fight!”

He whooped and cheered, and the girl pushed him aside again.

“‘Brutal, yet beautiful.’ That’s the broomsport motto. Here, brutality is beauty, and fighting spirit is everything! So if you’re willing, I’d like to—”

“Uwah?!”

Just as her explanation was reaching its conclusion, someone from up above screamed. One of the players had crashed into another, knocking them off their broom. They hurtled to the ground, seemingly sucked into it —“Elletardus!”

Right when they were about to land on the grass, Oliver jumped up from the bench and cast a spell to stop their momentum, gently lowering them to the ground. The field went quiet. Still holding his wand, Oliver felt a bit awkward.

“Sorry. It just seemed like they were falling too fast…”

He’d been unable to simply sit by and do nothing. He tried to apologize again, but the girl clapped him on the shoulder.

“…You wanna be a catcher?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve got good eyes. Like you said, that fall could’ve been bad. The grass can handle a normal fall, but an accelerated one like that can end in huge injuries. The people who prevent that from happening are called catchers. They wait on the ground and catch falling players.”

The girl pointed at the student Oliver had saved to help reinforce her point. Oliver was in a daze.

“They’re responsible for our safety and are also known as the pillars of our sport. They’re really important to sport flying. Your spells need to be accurate, of course, but you also need to be able to predict the players’

movements—just like you did. None of our catchers responded in time, but you made it. You've got talent."

"…No, I just happened to be in the right spot…"

"Or you can join the club as a player. Practice your butt off and try to become a starter, or just relax and enjoy the games. Either's fine! Only thing is, we're always in need of catchers for both sides. It'd be a huge help if you could fill that role. I'd be in your debt!"

"……I-I'll think about it."

It was all Oliver could do to offer that in the face of her passion and insistence.

"Looking forward to a yes!" the girl replied, then turned and ran onto the field to check the fallen student's injuries.

"That could be a good idea," Chela muttered.

"Chela?"

"Thinking back on flying class, I do believe Nanao is likely to be quite reckless in her flying. I can easily see her falling in a bad way during practice… In fact, I know it'll happen. But if you were there, Oliver, I'm sure you'd be excellent support."

"Oh! Indeed, I agree!" Nanao clapped her hands at this idea.

Oliver instinctively pinched his brow. "…You want me to join the club and be Nanao's personal catcher?"

"Only if you want to, of course. But you have so much talent. It would surely be fulfilling."

Chela smiled faintly, and Oliver sighed. He couldn't dismiss it offhand as a stupid idea, which meant he'd lost half the battle already.

Members who weren't aiming to become starters were free to participate in the club as they saw fit, and they could quit whenever they wanted to. Oliver mulled that over in his dorm room after what had been a long day.

"……"

The truth was, he wanted to wait to decide on joining until after he'd visited the other three teams. But the most important thing was whether he should join with Nanao or not. She'd been pulling him this way and that ever since he started at Kimberly, for better or worse. Was it really a good idea to extend that relationship into their clubs?

"…Actually, setting aside Nanao, do I really want to practice flying outside of class? It'll take extra time," Oliver muttered to himself as he thought, sitting on his bed.

Pete, who had been studying at his desk, glanced over at him. "…If you want to do it, then you should, I think."

"Pete?"

"I'm not trying to interfere with your choice, but you seem to be constantly searching for excuses not to do what you actually want to do."

Oliver stiffened in surprise at his roommate's unexpected comment. The bespectacled boy turned back to his desk, as if trying to escape his gaze. Oliver studied Pete's back as the boy resumed studying.

"…'Constantly searching for excuses,' huh?"

Repeating it aloud, he realized there was a terrible amount of truth in those words. Oliver smirked and stood up from his bed.

"Thanks. I'll think it over for a few days. Anyway, I better go."

"Oh…"

Oliver started for the door, and Pete made a sound, as if trying to say something. Oliver looked at him, and the bespectacled boy fumbled to find the words.

"…It's nothing. Take care."

"Right. Thanks."

Oliver accepted his friend's well wishes and left the room. He exited the dorm and walked alone under the stars toward the academy.

Tonight's entrance to the labyrinth was a giant basin in the corner of the third floor. Like paintings and mirrors, bodies of water were often connected to other realms. And yet, because the location they connected to changed depending on the day, students had to memorize their pattern in order to traverse between the academy and the labyrinth.

"……!"

The moment he arrived in the dark hallway, a heavy pressure weighed down his shoulders. Even after six months at Kimberly, entering the labyrinth on his own still filled him with dread. It was like the distance between him and death itself had just shrunk significantly. Would he ever get used to this feeling?

"…Get it together. If you can't walk around here on your own, you'll never be able to do anything."

Oliver lightly smacked his cheeks and recovered his nerves before illuminating the tip of his athame and proceeding cautiously into the labyrinth. A few minutes later, he sensed people, and after the third corner he turned, he came upon two upperclassmen.

"Whoa there, kid. We're not your enemies."

"You a first-year? You're too young to be walking around here alone. Don't go in too far."

Fortunately, they didn't linger and left him with just a warning. Oliver breathed a sigh of relief, then turned his eyes back to the dark hallway.

"…They're right. Can't let down my guard."

But regardless of his precautions, the next run-in blew away all his convictions. Such occurrences were all too common at Kimberly.

"Hmm? Aren't you…?"

After about an hour of wandering, Oliver ran into *her*. In a corner of the hall was a hauntingly beautiful witch sitting atop a stone and looking bored. Like their previous run-in, the air about her was thick with heart-stealing perfume.

"……Ms.…Salvadori?"

He called her name, as tense as if he'd just run into a monster.

The witch, Ophelia Salvadori, grinned sarcastically. “Yes, that’s me. Calm down, I’m not going to do anything to you right now. I’m not in the mood. Can’t you tell?”

The witch swung her dangling legs from her perch atop the stone.

Oliver frowned. He certainly couldn’t sense any danger like in their previous meeting.

“You’ve grown resistant to my perfume, haven’t you? Good. I could use a companion. I’m not asking you to be my friend or anything. I just need someone, anyone to talk to.”

It was hard to tell if she was joking or serious. Ophelia pointed to the stone she was sitting on, inviting him to join her. Oliver considered turning on his heel and sprinting in the opposite direction, but perhaps it wouldn’t be a good idea to anger her in this place of endless darkness.

He thought for a few more moments, then sat down slightly distanced from the witch. He knew she meant no harm right now, and he aimed to keep from kicking a hornet’s nest.

“…Have you been living in the labyrinth this whole time?” he asked.

“Oh, I’ve gone back to the academy. I get a hankering for the cafeteria’s pumpkin pie, you know? Do you like their pie, too?”

“…I guess I prefer tarts.”

Oliver wavered but decided to answer honestly. It would be easy to simply agree with her constantly, but that seemed too obviously fake. If she really wanted to just shoot the breeze with a lowerclassman, then this was probably the best course of action.

Ophelia smiled. Oliver was relieved to see he’d chosen the correct response.

“Yeah, I like them, too. I’ve been hearing rumors of you guys really making a name for yourselves. How did it feel, fighting that garuda?”

“The truth is, I’m bewildered we won. And honestly, I’d rather never do it again.”

Oliver answered honestly, and Ophelia giggled.

“Godfrey said something similar once. This is just a guess, but I think he likes you and your friends.”

“…What makes you think that?”

“Because you’re so similar. Especially the part about first-years going on adventures that are way out of your league. Carlos and I were often his accomplices.”

It was a surprising past to reveal. Oliver resisted the urge to instantly question her. Instead, Ophelia softly asked a question of her own. “…Have you talked to Carlos? You remember that pretentious twit who was with Godfrey, don’t you? I think they’re a prefect now.”

Oliver considered his response to this carefully, too. If he told her about the gathering the other night, he’d be clueing her into Pete’s secret. So he spoke about everything but that night.

“…Carlos gave me some advice about living at Kimberly, and we’ve chatted a few times. They seem like a caring person, just like Godfrey.”

“Caring? No, Carlos just has their own little proclivities. If you’re not careful, you’ll end up being their next pet. Carlos loves younger kids who respond well to attention, like you and your friends.”

It was difficult to tell if this was a warning or an insult.

The witch stretched out. “Ah, I feel a bit better. Thanks for killing some time with me. However…”

“—!”

She touched his chin with a white fingertip, and he stiffened.

Ophelia smiled bewitchingly. “…I don’t recommend wandering around this deep on your own. Limit your adventures and stick to your studies in the academy—especially for the next few months.”

And with that, she stood up and walked down the hall. Once she’d disappeared behind a corner and the lingering perfume had thinned, Oliver exhaled a deep sigh of relief.

After parting peaceably with Ophelia, Oliver walked for another twenty minutes before arriving at his destination.

He chanted the password, revealing the secret door, and upon entering the room, he was immediately embraced by a girl with pale-golden hair.

“Noll!”

A bit surprised, Oliver accepted the hug.

“Whoa! Good evening, Shannon.”

He gently pushed her away by the shoulders. Then he looked to the center of the room, where he spotted a large young man sitting and attending to his contrabass.

“Thanks for coming, Noll. How was the walk?”

“I didn’t get lost, at least, and I think I avoided any dangerous areas… I still need to get used to it, though. Carefully.”

The copper-haired young man nodded deeply at his honest remarks. The pale-blond girl smiled, too, and placed a hand on his shoulder. They were his brother, Gwyn Sherwood, and sister, Shannon Sherwood, both upperclassmen at Kimberly and his blood relatives—specifically, his cousins.

“More importantly, I was surprised to see you the other night, Gwyn. I didn’t know you were a duo act with Carlos.”

“It’s true. I wouldn’t call them an ally, but we’ve known each other a long time.”

Gwyn spoke calmly as he continued to care for his instrument. Just hearing his deep, calm voice was enough to ease Oliver’s tension.

“That said, I’m happy to hear you were able to get here on your own. This is me and Shannon’s secret atelier—think of it as your second home. Take a break or train here; it’s your choice.”

“I’ll…make tea,” said Shannon. “Noll, want some cake?”

Shannon began happily preparing a whole tea service. Within five minutes, she’d produced some black tea and cakes, as well as a chair, which

Oliver accepted. Across from him at the table sat Gwyn, and next to him was Shannon, who smiled gently.

Oliver picked up his teacup and took a sip. "…Ah, I can finally relax. I was so on edge making my way here. Especially when I ran into Ophelia. I nearly fainted then."

The moment she heard this, Shannon leaned in extremely close to Oliver. It was all Oliver could do to keep from spilling his tea.

"You…met Lia? Where?"

Her expression was deadly serious. Taken aback by her reaction, Oliver quickly summed up his run-in with the witch.

Shannon rose from her seat, but Gwyn stopped her with a soft warning.

"Don't. If she returned to the depths after leaving Noll, then at this point, you'll never catch her."

Shannon dropped her gaze dejectedly.

Finished with his instrument's care, Gwyn crossed his arms. "So, Salvadori, huh? She's a dangerous one, but she and Shannon aren't enemies. Long ago, they even used to get along. They haven't seen each other in a year, though."

"…You were friends, Shannon?"

"Lia gets…lonely," Shannon muttered.

Suddenly, Oliver had a realization: The girl he was so scared of was also just a student one year below his sister.

"Funny how things work, huh? I heard you two met soon after the entrance ceremony, but it's rare to find her this high up. She must've had some reason."

Gwyn closed his eyes and pondered what this reason might be for a while, but he decided against thinking anymore and opened his eyes. Oliver's reflection shimmered in their gentle light.

"Enough talk about Salvadori. Tell me about you. Anything's fine. Shannon and I can't wait to hear it."

Shannon perked up and smiled at Oliver. Feeling a little shy, the boy searched his memories for something to tell them.

"There's been a lot… Where do I even begin?"

When their teacups were empty, Oliver had just about finished his reminiscing.

"Nanao Hibiya, eh?"

Gwyn muttered the name of the person who appeared the most in his younger brother's stories. Oliver had described her in the most detail, so of course Gwyn would mention her first.

Oliver nodded. "She's still green as a mage, but she's got true talent, even if it is unconventional," he said. "And it's growing, day by day. At this rate, it's hard to imagine where she'll be in a year."

He was straightforward in his explanation, including his own inability to quantify her talents. After a few moments, Gwyn spoke up again.

"…Are you sure she employs the seventh spellblade?"

“I can’t be totally certain… She only used it once, in the battle against Vera Miligan. She’s tried to replicate it since, but to no avail. But my instinct says it is. Even if she was a temporary spellblade user, I can say it was of the same caliber.”

Oliver’s conviction surpassed all reason. Gwyn, too, seemed to accept what he said without doubt. Once the topic had shifted to this subject, Oliver was no longer Gwyn’s younger brother but his lord and master.

“She also has this amazing charisma that draws people to her, don’t you think? Reminds me of a certain someone.”

Gwyn’s comment made Oliver bite his lip. He’d expected this response, as well.

“…At the Broom Matching, Mom’s broom accepted her.” The memory was still fresh in his mind.

Gwyn wasn’t surprised, since he’d already been told that a samurai from Azia had tamed “that” broom. He hadn’t known anything about the girl herself, as the story had circulated around the school the very day it happened.

“Nanao has something in her. I feel it, too—I can’t keep my eyes off her. She’s also quite reckless, and I can hardly leave her to her own devices. I don’t know what to do…”

Oliver laid his feelings bare to his two cousins, still unable to identify the emotions that continued to bloom within him. A soft smile rose on Shannon’s lips.

“You…really care for this girl, don’t you, Noll?”

“I…”

He couldn’t immediately agree, but he also couldn’t deny it. Was it right to sum this feeling up as affection? Oliver furrowed his brow.

“Calm down, Noll,” Gwyn said. “It’s no use glossing over the truth with Shannon… The feeling of ‘attraction’ is very important to mages. This girl will most likely bring about a great change in your life. You shouldn’t hide from that.”

His brother was telling him to stop trying to forcefully express his nebulous feelings with words and just let them exist within his heart.

Oliver swallowed. He was at a loss. What distance should he take with her? What kind of relationship should they have?

“When the time comes, you’ll know what to call it. Don’t rush the conclusion. Take it easy. You’re still first-years.”

“……”

“Certainly, we’d love to get this Nanao Hibiya to join us. But haste makes waste. Don’t let awkward selfishness cloud your mind at this stage. Just be yourself and be sincere with your friends. That’s the key to gaining allies—for both sides of you, Noll.”

Gwyn’s grounded advice struck a chord in Oliver’s heart, and he could feel the wavering part of him settle down. Oliver nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right… I’m glad I got to talk to you about this. Well, I should get going.”

Shannon was about to refill his cup, but he stopped her with a hand and stood from his seat. If he stayed here any longer, he might grow too attached. Shannon’s face fell, and she reached out for him.

“…Take care, Noll.”

Oliver accepted the embrace and hugged her back. She was warm. Family. He didn’t want to let go. The feelings rose in him, but he made sure not to express any of them. He knew all too well that he didn’t have the right. At the same time, he knew that his inner conflict was clear as day to her.

“Don’t worry. I promise I’ll come back.”

Which was why any pretense of strength wasn’t allowed. Oliver made his promise not with empty hope but with unwavering determination.

For about an hour after he left the secret atelier, Oliver wandered the labyrinth without any particular destination in mind. Then, about forty minutes later, he felt a prickling on the nape of his neck.

“……”

He changed his direction a bit, searching for a specific place this time. Somewhere wide, with flat ground and no risk of disturbances. Once he found an area that fit all these criteria, Oliver stopped again.

“…That’s enough. Come out, Mr. Rossi,” he growled. Immediately, a lanky figure poked his head out from a corner behind him.

“Aw, you knew? So sad.”

The boy stepped into the hall, scratching the back of his head. It was none other than Tullio Rossi, the one who’d suggested the first-years’ battle-royal tournament. Oliver fixed him with a look and asked him a single question.

“I’d sensed you were after me ever since you suggested the event in the cafeteria. Did I do something to earn your ire?”

“Nah, nah. I have nothing against you or your family.”

“Then why are you after me?”

Rossi jokingly shrugged at the follow-up question. “I do not like that you get all the attention and I get none. Is that not enough of a reason?”

“You’re entitled to your opinions, but I doubt I get more attention than Nanao.”

“Nanao is cute, so she is exempt. I cannot ’ate her.”

It was impossible to read his true intentions from such a frivolous answer. Oliver glared at him silently as Rossi quickly drew his athame.

“But who cares about the details? A fight will reveal the truth. That is what is so great about them, no?”

He was no longer in the mood to answer questions, Oliver realized, placing a hand on his blade as well.

“Two things: No magic, and we keep the dulling spell to ’alf potency. What do you say, eh?”

“……”

“I am not into pesky shoot-outs—it’s not a real fight if there is no blood. Let us just keep it to one step above gutting each other. Then we will ’ave a battle fitting of the labyrinth!”

Rossi sneered. Not only did he want to keep their duel to swords only, but he also wanted to purposely lighten the effects of the spell that prevented them from killing each other. Up top, this would only be allowed of senior students, but down in the labyrinth, such rules were effectively meaningless. Oliver nodded in agreement with his opponent’s suggestions.

“Sure, I accept both conditions.”

“Ha-ha! Down to party, eh? I like it!”

Rossi cackled. The more dangerous conditions weren’t enough to shake Oliver, but Rossi seemed almost at home in the labyrinth. Alarm bells sounded in Oliver’s head.

““Securus.””

They applied weakened versions of the dulling spell to each other’s blades, and once the white glow subsided, they took their places within the one-step, one-spell distance.

“Are we ready? Then let us begin!”

Rossi readied his sword. Oliver pointed his sword tip at his opponent as well, who all of a sudden shouted at him.

“Ah, right! I forgot to mention something!”

“……?”

What now? he wanted to ask, but Rossi took off. He swung at Oliver from the side, trying to cut into his armpit; Oliver used his athame as a shield to block the strike.

“Actually, on second thought, I did not.”

“Right off the bat with this, huh?”

Oliver frowned as their swords clashed. A head-on “surprise” attack as soon as the duel started—Rossi was proving to be as conniving as his first impression had suggested.

The weight pressing against Oliver’s blade vanished, and his enemy attacked again. Moving from a diagonal slash into a strike at Oliver’s wrist, Rossi employed the two attacks as a feint for his thrust; Oliver blocked them all. Rossi’s volley of blows continued, and he shouted in excitement.

“Ha-ha! Nice defense, eh! Beautiful use of the Lanoff style! You ’ad a good teacher, no?”

Rossi dropped his body, and his blade whistled through the air toward Oliver’s shin. A strike aimed for his legs was annoying, to say the least. Oliver instantly shifted his leading foot, and once the attack missed, he countered with a thrust of his own.

“Whoa!”

There’s no way he can dodge now, Oliver thought, but Rossi dived onto the floor in a roll. As he passed Oliver’s side, Rossi swung at his ankle. Oliver yanked his foot up to avoid the blow. Rossi landed behind him, then stood up and got into a midstance again.

“Unlike me, my sword can be quite rude. She is such a contrarian that I cannot even practice the most fundamental styles. That is why all my teachers ’ave bored me. Stupid, no?”

The rule against spells in their duel allowed Rossi time to run his mouth. His sword technique, however, surprised Oliver. He was all over the place. Attacking the legs, dodging by rolling—he ignored the basics of sword arts without a second thought. And yet, surprisingly enough, there was no awkwardness in his movements.

“You see, I am my own man. The Lanoff style, the Rizett style, the Koutz style—none of them speak to me. Every time I learned a technique, I could not help but think there was a quicker way. ’ave you ever thought about it, Mr. ’orn?”

Oliver half ignored the arrogant question, focusing on their duel instead. There was no need to rush. First, he had to understand his opponent’s fighting style. What he’d seen so far, he assumed, was Rossi’s basic style. However, that didn’t mean Oliver was stuck in a defensive battle.

“Hah!”

Oliver attacked head-on, without feints. It was a standard plan to counter abnormal styles with the orthodox approach. He’d attack relentlessly, giving no openings and laying on the pressure until his opponent was backed against the wall, then deliver the final blow. From his experience, people like Rossi usually buckled under such pressure.

“Ho!”

Unfortunately, his plan fell apart after the first strike. Oliver widened his eyes in surprise—his blade had been blocked, but not by his opponent’s

sword. Rossi's left hand was covered in armor, which he'd used to counter the sword with a punch.

"Like this, for example."

But it didn't end there. Before Oliver could mount a second strike, Rossi stamped down on his foot. Prevented from moving backward, Oliver faltered, and Rossi struck, nearly tackling him in the process.

"And this!"

Forced to block from an awkward position, Oliver quickly jumped back. The flurry of blows continued, greedily aiming for his vital spots. Oliver barely managed to parry each strike. There was no time for him to counter, and his opponent was in complete control of the fight.

"…So fighting dirty is your specialty, huh?"

"Apologies for my poor manners."

Everything but their duel melted away, and they found themselves in a deadlock. Oliver could feel his opponent's breath from across his sword as he analyzed his fighting style.

Rossi's nondominant hand, which was covered in a gauntlet, was his only way of blocking sword strikes other than using his own athame. And yet, using his hand as a shield wasn't easy. The surface area was just too small. But making it larger wasn't an option because adamant, the magical metal his gauntlet was made of, was extremely hard but also extremely heavy. In order to keep it from weighing him down, the biggest he could make it was about half the size of his hand.

With those limits in mind, it naturally followed that the gauntlet could only be used as a shield in the direst moments of their fight. However, some fighters employed the metal in a more offensive fashion—not as a gauntlet, but as a knuckle guard for their fist to blunt their opponent's attacks. None of the three basic sword arts styles endorsed this technique; in fact, it was practically a taboo.

"Do what you want. This won't be enough to break my training," Oliver stated confidently, admitting his opponent was tricky.

Rossi narrowed his eyes sharply. "You will regret your offer," he spat.

The two edged toward each other. As soon as they entered the one-step, one-spell distance, Rossi dashed forward. Circling to Oliver's left, he unleashed two blows; Oliver didn't miss the fact that he'd quickly stepped in with his back foot. *He's going to force me on the defensive with his fist*, Oliver realized, and he focused all his effort on cleaving the incoming fist.

"—?!"

The blow to his face took him completely by surprise.

"Ha-haaah!"

Sensing his opponent's confusion, Rossi capitalized on the opening. He rained down a flurry of blows right through Oliver's guard. An urge to jump back welled up inside Oliver, but he stubbornly ignored it. If he retreated, Rossi would run him right through, his mind screamed. So instead, he put his all into standing his ground, continuing to play defense.

“Hup!”

Rossi weaved in a thrust to the face among his attacks. The moment Oliver sensed a break in the assault, he instantly jumped back and distanced himself. A sick grin spread on Rossi’s lips.

“His calm mask has finally started to crack. It’s refreshing to see!”

Using the back of his hand, Oliver quietly wiped away something hot that was dripping down his nose. As he expected, a line of bright-red fluid stained his skin. His nose was bleeding from Rossi’s punch.

“……!”

There was no mistaking it. At that moment, Oliver accepted the fact that he’d taken a hit.

“I bet you never expected to get a nosebleed, eh? Mages are all the same. But I find it strange. We all have this piece of metal on one hand, and yet no one ever tries to punch. Why? If he is too small for defense, then just use him for offense, no?”

“……”

“There are so few strike techniques. That is my biggest complaint with the three basic styles. You want to know what I think? Mages are too focused on looks. This is a fight to the death, no? It is not any different from a brawl between nonmagicals. So should we not use every tool at our disposal?” Rossi shamelessly stated.

Oliver wiped the blood from his lip. “…I have to thank you, Mr. Rossi,” he replied.

“Hah?”

“You’ve made me painfully aware of my own shortcomings. I’m totally worthless. Not worth the salt I sweat. Not after taking a blow from the likes of you.” It was a harsh thing to say about himself.

Rossi’s face contorted with fury. “…’ilarious. Looking for another beating, eh?”

Rossi’s lips drew back, revealing his canines in a most disturbing impression of a smile.

But Oliver just shook his head and remained in his stance. “Not going to happen. Your sword will break in the next eight moves.”

Oliver spoke with the utmost confidence.

A gruesome smile formed on Rossi’s face. “Very funny, my friend. No one ’as made me so angry in a long time!”

He was clearly in no mood for more talking. Rossi attacked Oliver for a third time, striking from every angle and building momentum with each strike. His wild flurry ignored all the basics of sword arts.

Oliver calmly dodged, coldly calculating his chance for a counterattack. “Gotcha!”

Aiming for the moment Oliver moved to counter, Rossi shot his left arm out again. An adamant-gauntlet punch—his secret move that ignored the rules of sword arts. He used his right arm to strike out with his sword as well, intending to prevent any escape this time.

“—?!”

But the moment Rossi was sure of his victory, Oliver snaked his arms around Rossi’s left arm and locked it in place.

“This is the reason the three basic styles have very few fist techniques, Mr. Rossi.”

“Kah…!”

Rossi’s pinned shoulder began to creak from the strain. The moment he’d extended his fist, Oliver had wrapped his arms around it and circled to Rossi’s left. In this position, he was totally out of range of his opponent’s athame. Rossi’s expression twisted with pain and panic.

“At punching distance, throws and locks also become viable. Basically, the king of your beloved close-up brawls is actually grappling, not punching. If you don’t finish the fight in one blow, it’s not even good as a distraction against an opponent who’s willing to take the hit in order to win. You’re basically asking to be grappled by extending your arm. You’re defenseless.”

He eased off just before the joint snapped and continued lecturing, making sure that his captive student learned his lesson in the fundamentals of close-quarters combat.

“You managed to scrape together some semblance of style on your own. I’ll admit, you have talent. You slugged me good, after all. But the history behind orthodox styles won’t be demolished with a single punch.”

“Gah—aaaah!”

Rossi’s shoulder dislocated with a dull *pop*; Rossi had done it on purpose. The pain and fear of his body breaking wasn’t enough to dampen a mage’s fighting spirit. Gladly sacrificing an arm in order to escape the lock, Rossi turned to face Oliver.

“Do not lecture me! This is not over yet!”

“It is now.”

Rossi charged at his opponent in a murderous fury, and Oliver settled into his stance stoically. There was nothing to fear. Rossi was off balance from forcing his way out of the armlock, and his breathing was uncharacteristically labored from the pain of his dislocated shoulder. Tullio Rossi stood no chance of winning in his current state.

This final clash would decide the duel. Rossi aimed a thrust at Oliver’s head, and Oliver calmly knocked it away with the back of his left hand. The blade slashed through nothing but air as Rossi’s body was defenselessly exposed to a lethal strike—this was the proper use of the gauntlet. With enough foresight and the right timing, one could strike the oncoming blade from the side and render it useless. On top of that, this also created a huge opening. The three basic styles all shared this high-level technique: the parry.

Rossi watched in shock as the duel-ending blow raced toward his arm. There was nothing he could do to resist. A successful parry was a death sentence.

“—That was eight moves, Mr. Rossi.”

The loser's athame dropped from his hands, dripping with fresh blood. There was a deep gash on his upper arm, and his weapon was on the floor. A long silence passed as Rossi looked between his wound and his athame.

"You really piss me off…," he hissed weakly.

A few minutes later, he treated his injuries without any help from Oliver.

"Here, your medallion."

Rossi removed the medallion from his robe pocket and tossed it curtly to him. Oliver caught it, and as he was examining it, Rossi let out an exaggerated sigh.

"This does not look so good now. I lost the one battle I did not want to. Even got a lecture."

"…I was a little high-handed. Sorry."

Oliver gave a short apology after checking to see if the medallion was genuine.

Rossi snorted. "And I 'ate the little good boy act. Do not apologize. Whatever. We are done 'ere. Good-bye."

He waved a hand and made to leave.

Oliver thought for a bit, then called out to him. "Mr. Rossi—like I said during our duel, you have good instincts. Depending on how you polish them, they could become quite a powerful weapon. But stay as you are, and you'll eventually hit a wall."

"……"

"I suggest you choose one of the three basic styles and relearn it from scratch before you pick up bad habits. It's not too late to create your own style once you've mastered the basics. Actually, the Koutz style requires good instincts, so it might be a good fit—"

"What the *'ell* is your deal?!"

Rossi spun around, unable to bear Oliver's advice any longer. He stared at Oliver, eyes full of bewilderment.

"Stop pouring salt in my wounds! You already got your medallion, no? What more do you want from me?"

Oliver chewed his lip. He realized that a gracious winner shouldn't lecture the loser. But he just couldn't stay silent.

"I realize I'm meddling. But I just feel it's a waste… Actually, I'm jealous of your unique talent."

"…What?"

"In our duel, all I did was replicate what my teacher taught me. None of it came from my own imagination. It's like that with everything. I'm only a borrower, a caretaker of others' things… There's nothing that's truly my own."

His expression bitter, Oliver stared down at the palms of his hands. They could handle many things with ease, like sword arts techniques and the proper spell for a situation. And yet, it never felt like he'd exceeded his teacher's instructions.

“So I just want you to value the talent you have. That’s all. I’m sorry that I always sound like I’m giving a lecture.”

Oliver shamefully dropped his gaze.

Rossi furrowed his brow and studied the boy. “Good boy ’as ’is own troubles, eh? …Whatever,” he stated simply, then turned on his heel and left for good this time.

Once he’d disappeared around a corner, Oliver finally breathed a sigh of relief. Then a voice came from right behind him.

“Excellent work, my lord.”

“……?!”

He jumped forward like a startled rabbit, simultaneously spinning around. His gaze landed on a small, kneeling girl who had appeared out of nowhere.

“I was witness to your duel. Your victory certainly put him in his place. I was utterly impressed.”

“…Oh, it’s you, Ms. Carste.”

He exhaled in relief once he realized who she was—there kneeled the girl his brother had introduced to him the evening he’d executed Darius Grenville. Her name was Teresa Carste; born and raised in the labyrinth, her mastery of invisibility was beyond compare.

“Thanks for the compliment, but it wasn’t that impressive of a duel. I even took a hit in the first half. I’m really getting fed up with how green I am.” Oliver spoke honestly, not even trying to hold up a facade since Teresa had probably seen everything herself.

The girl shook her head firmly. “He wouldn’t have been able to even catch your shadow if he’d faced the version of you from that night.”

She slipped close, making not a sound. The air itself barely moved.

“I admire that raw version of you, like a naked blade. Your kindness is a sheath that clouds your brilliance.”

“—!”

A pair of eyes peered up at him, and he recoiled. Teresa grabbed his right hand with both of hers.

“If cutting me down will part the clouds, then please go ahead. It would be my honor to become your whetstone, my lord.”

She placed his hand on the hilt of his athame.

Oliver stared into her eyes. “…Your cheeks are red, Ms. Carste.”

He meant to catch her off guard. Teresa stiffened for a moment, then immediately pressed her hands on her cheeks.

“I had a suspicion about this when we first met, but that’s not how you normally talk, is it? I appreciate that you’re making an effort for my sake, but I think you’re overdoing it. Just relax.”

He pushed further. He was quite aware that he was in a position to lead many, but that didn’t mean he wanted to create fanatics. Especially not out of young children. So he attempted to stress that this wasn’t to his tastes.

“Th-that’s not true…sir.”

The unexpected response made her slip a little. *Good*, Oliver thought as he observed her. The last thing he wanted was to groom this young girl into an avenger's right hand. Even if such a wish was helplessly contradictory.

"I won't use and abandon you as a whetstone or as a follower. Remember that."

"…F-forgive me!"

Teresa ran off, unable to hide how shaken she was. She quickly disappeared into the darkness of the labyrinth. Silence returned, and Oliver reflected on his behavior: *Was I acting mature?*

Meanwhile, Rossi was heading toward the academy after parting ways with Oliver, the memories of his loss roiling in his mind.

"Dammit… Ah, dammit, I'm so pissed!"

His frustration had reached a boiling point. He could have swallowed the humiliation of defeat. But a different sort of bitterness dominated his heart.

"What the 'ell did 'e say? Relearn one of the basic styles from scratch? Oh, so easy. Who the 'ell does 'e think 'e is?"

Rossi scowled. He'd hated Oliver Horn ever since he'd first seen him in sword arts class. Oliver valued the basic styles and stuck to orthodox methods; all the complete opposite of him. But most of all, he could see in Oliver's swordsmanship the incredible amount of effort it had taken him to get there.

"…Just 'ow much 'as 'e trained? 'e replicates the textbook perfectly."

A chill ran up Rossi's spine. He'd picked up techniques from a bunch of different styles, but he and everyone else agreed that he conformed to no one style. Aiming for the legs and using fist strikes were techniques he'd specifically developed to counter "honorable" opponents. But things didn't look so good if a boy his own age could break down his strategy after one clash.

And yet, Oliver Horn had done exactly that. Looking back on it, the only attack Rossi had connected with was the blow to his face. All his more dangerous sword strikes had been blocked, never making contact with Oliver's body. He'd been completely shut down by the most orthodox, by-the-book method possible.

"'e's one crazy bastard," Rossi said honestly. That wasn't the sort of territory a normal fifteen-year-old had any business being in. If he was extremely talented or had good instincts, it might make sense. But after crossing swords with him, Rossi knew that Oliver Horn wasn't that type. He'd just filled his every waking moment with training. That was the only thing he could think of. All to immediately obtain what he might have in ten or twenty years. The training to achieve that must have been insanely strict —torturous, even.

"I just want you to value the talent you have."

"……"

Rossi had walked a path of thorns for years and years. And it was for this reason that Rossi understood the weight of those words, whether he liked it

or not. His pace slowed until eventually, he stopped. Scratching the back of his head, he exhaled deeply.

"…Haah, fine. I can go beg Instructor Garland. It is not my style to learn the proper way, but…I 'ate losing even more."

He'd once again face everything he'd belittled till now. Rossi knew this was a path he would never have chosen just the previous day, and it made him chuckle bitterly. What could he do? There was no point resisting after witnessing such swordsmanship.

"…Lost, did you?"

Just as he'd begun attempting to accept his new situation, a chilling voice echoed in his ear from behind.

"All it takes is one look to recognize a loser. Who beat you?"

Their tone was past ridicule or sarcasm—this was pure scorn. Rossi's face immediately tightened. He didn't need to turn around to know who was there.

"Of all the people I could meet, it 'ad to be you, eh?"

Deep inside him, it made some sort of sense. Challenging someone to a duel, losing utterly, and then escaping unharmed was unheard of at Kimberly.

"Before I waste my time, let me ask: You still have medallions left to give me, correct?"

The arrogance of a predator seeped into the air between them.

Letting out a single breath and steeling himself, Rossi placed a hand on the athame at his waist. "Ah, funny. What am I, a bank?!" he shouted, then drew his weapon and turned to face his opponent. His gaze landed on a lone mage standing perfectly still, not even reaching for a weapon despite Rossi's total willingness to fight.

"……!"

The moment their eyes met, a sickly sweat formed on Rossi's cheek. This person was sharp as a razor, far beyond any first-year. Long ago, he'd sensed something similar the one time he'd seen a Gnostic Hunter—the frontline soldiers of the magical world.

"You're right, for I have nothing to offer. I am merely going to *take*."

And with that exceedingly arrogant statement, Rossi's opponent drew.

Rossi instantly dashed forward—and into his second loss that night.

Oliver managed to exit the labyrinth without any further trouble, and it was just past two in the morning when he got back to his dorm room.

"…I'm back," he whispered so as not to wake his roommate and crept inside. Barely illuminating the darkness with a dimmed lamp, he reached to undo the belt that held his athame—when he noticed the state of his friend on the bed.

"Huff… Huff…"

"……?"

Pete was sleeping on his side, practically shuddering with every breath.

"Huff… Huff! Huff! Huff…!"

His breathing became more rapid and pained.

Concerned, Oliver rushed over. “You okay, Pete?”

“Ah…?”

He patted him on the shoulder, and the boy sleepily opened his eyelids.

Oliver gently placed a hand on Pete’s forehead. “You’ve got a fever… And your mana circulation’s going berserk.”

“It hurts… I feel nauseous… Can’t…breathe…”

“It’s all right. You’ll feel better soon. I’m taking your top off, okay?”

He helped Pete sit up, then undid the buttons of his pajama shirt. Pete’s swollen breasts indicated he was currently in his female form.

“…? Wait, what’re you…?”

Pete was confused. After managing to remove Pete’s top, Oliver inhaled deeply and took control of the mana flowing within his own body. His preparations complete, he placed his right palm on his roommate’s exposed back.

“Ah…”

Pete instantly felt something warm flowing into him.

Oliver proceeded to explain as he rubbed Pete’s back. “This is a healing art. By sending my own mana into you through my hand, I can tune your body’s flow of mana. This is only a stopgap solution, mind you.”

Every mage knew this art. It was the most primitive of all magical healing arts. The mana that had become stagnant within Pete began to move again with Oliver’s encouragement, and Pete’s labored breathing relaxed.

“I feel…better…”

“You should. Like those upperclassmen said, your body’s still not used to handling the mana of your female form. When your sex changes, so does the flow of your mana. The paths have changed so much that your mana can’t flow correctly. Your mana distribution is off, which is causing you to feel sick.”

He explained what was happening so that his friend could understand. It wasn’t enough to just heal him—both combined were the best way to give Pete relief.

“At times like this, external moderation is the best solution. You lead the built-up mana to the parts of the body where it’s needed, like so.”

“Mm…!”

An intense jolt ran through Pete’s body, causing him to spasm.

Leaving his hand on his shoulder, Oliver spoke in a calm tone. “Relax, Pete. It’s okay. There’s nothing to worry about.”

The concern in his voice and the warmth of his hand helped Pete trust his roommate. There was no reason to resist. Slowly, he relaxed, leaving himself in Oliver’s care.

“……Do this often?”

“Mm?”

“Do you do this often? You’re so purposeful. You’re, like…good at it.”

The comments slipped from Pete’s lips as he accepted the treatment.

The question made Oliver go silent for a bit; then he nodded. “…Yeah, I have experience. It’s not uncommon for a mage’s mana circulation to go haywire, even if they aren’t rare cases like yourself. It happens when they’re sick, for example, or during puberty. And…”

A memory resurfaced vividly in his mind as he continued the healing art. Back then, he was terrible at it. He’d been desperate, with no hope for a relaxing conversation like tonight. Every night, he’d faced her back and suppressed the tears that threatened to overflow.

“Ah, that feels good. Thank you, Noll.”

Despite his awkward fingertips and inexperienced heart, she always smiled at him, as if giving him a warm embrace.

“…during pregnancy.”

He continued the rest of the treatment in silence. Pete basked in the pleasant feeling. Suddenly, with the pain subsided and his mind clear, he felt an strike of panic upon realizing his current situation. He was in his female form, half naked, and Oliver was still touching his bare skin.

“H-hey… Are you done yet?”

“Mm? Oh, sorry. I was too focused. How do you feel? Your mana circulation should be much calmer now.”

Oliver quickly paused the treatment to check on his friend. Breathing a sigh of relief, Pete assessed himself.

“…I feel so much better, wow. My nausea’s gone, and I can breathe.”

“That’s good. But like I said before, this is only a temporary measure. Until your body learns to control its female mana, you’ll have to be prepared to do this a lot.”

Pete nodded as he pulled on his pajama top.

“…The others said it would take at least two months, or up to a year,” he said.

“It definitely won’t get better soon, but eventually, it’ll subside. Think of it like growing pains. And I’ll be right here, so you can always count on me.” Oliver spoke comfortingly, placing his hand on Pete’s head and stroking his ashen hair. It felt nice, but the next moment, Pete snapped out of his daze and grabbed Oliver’s arm.

“…Don’t just touch someone’s head.”

“Oh, sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“……W-we have to get up early tomorrow. Let’s get to bed.”

Pete bundled up in his blanket as if trying to escape the moment.

Oliver turned to return to his own bed when a muffled voice came from within the blanket.

“And…thanks.”

Unable to look his friend in the face, it was the best Pete could manage. Oliver happily accepted his awkward gratitude with a smile.

“Good night, Pete.”

The next day, at lunch, Pete decided to tell his friends. This was something that had been on his mind ever since that night with Carlos.

“A reversi?! No way! That’s amazing!”

Katie’s eyes went as wide as dinner plates after hearing his story. The six of them, huddled in a corner of an empty classroom under the veil of a sound dampening spell, listened as Pete revealed his ability.

“I’d suspected something, but a reversi… That’s quite a rare trait. Congratulations, Pete. My heart soars for you.” Chela grasped his hand and praised him. She and Katie reacted the same way Oliver had. Pete, recognizing this was a perspective unique to mages, expressed his concerns.

“At the moment, I’m so busy being sick that it doesn’t feel like something to be proud of. How exactly am I supposed to make use of this ability?” He bluntly asked for their advice.

Chela crossed her arms and *hmm*’d. “There are numerous advantages, but let’s see… Pete, come here. I’ll teach you the fastest, most practical way to control the female body.”

She beckoned him over, and he reluctantly approached. Stooping, Chela put her fingers to a slightly questionable spot beneath Pete’s belt.

“?! Wh-what the hell—?”

“No need to feel embarrassed. Listen to me—now that you’re in a female body, you have one new organ. Do you know what it is?” Chela demanded as Pete freaked out. He then looked fearfully at his lower half in sudden realization. “That’s right—a uterus. Most commonly known as the womb,”

said Chela. “In any case, the uterus is such a significant organ to witches that it’s even called a second heart. The reason being that it acts as one of many mana storehouses in the body.”

“Mana…storehouses?”

“Yes. The mana stored in here is like an emergency ration, to only be consumed in times of dire need. When you run out of mana, the door naturally opens and provides your body with nourishment. However, with training, it is possible to open and close this door at will.”

As she explained, Chela pressed firmly on Pete’s abdomen.

“You’re going to experience that now. Brace yourself for a shock.”

She gave him a second to get ready, then, using her arm as a pipe, she sent the refined mana from within herself over to Pete. His heart thumped loudly, and his uterus instantly responded to the sudden, massive influx of mana.

“Gah—?!”

Mana coursed through Pete’s body. Waves of heat emanated through him, starting from his abdomen. His mind was completely overwhelmed; he simply *experienced* it.

“Wh-what is this? Power’s overflowing in me…!”

“It’s a fresh, raw sensation, I’m sure. The unlocking of your mana reserves causes a temporary increase in your mana circulation. Your mana output has now increased many times over, and the effectiveness of your spells will be visibly improved.”

The ringlet girl continued her explanation. She let him experience the sensation for about thirty seconds, then touched his abdomen and sent her mana in again. Suddenly, the waves of overwhelming power within Pete’s body subsided. This time, he understood that the unlocked mana reserves in his uterus had been cut off.

“I closed the door. The strain is too great on your body while you’re still new to this. But after that experience, what do you think? A female body isn’t bad, is it?”

Chela puffed out her chest with pride. Seeing she was finished with her explanation, Oliver jumped in.

“The uterus’s ability to store mana is the reason why women have historically had an advantage in the magical world,” he said. “A man’s testicles have a similar function, but it’s nothing compared with the uterus.”

Guy looked at his crotch dubiously.

Oliver grinned wryly at this, then continued, “However, for men, there are many such places in the body. With that in mind, total mana retention and output is similar for men and women. Thus, neither sex is unconditionally better—or at least, that’s the idea proposed by recent research.”

Satisfied with his accurate supplementary explanation, Chela nodded firmly. Nanao, impressed, placed a hand on her *hakama*, which had been repurposed into a skirt.

“I see, the uterus… I myself am but a shadow of a woman, but can I do the same?”

“Don’t lift your skirt, Nanao! …Honestly, your mana circulation far exceeds these levels. I suspect you already use your body’s reserve mana as needed, including that of your uterus. Hence your Innocent Color.”

Oliver forced her to put down her skirt, while Katie eyed Pete up and down.

“…Difficult topics aside, you currently have a girl’s body, right, Pete?”

Her eyes glinted dangerously.

Pete recoiled from the indescribable pressure. “Wh-what? What’s with the creepy smile…?”

He stepped back, trying to escape from her gaze.

Katie closed in, grinning from ear to ear. “Hey, Pete. Would you wanna wear a skirt?”

“Huh?!”

“Ever since I first saw you, I thought your small, delicate features would look wonderful in cute clothes. I gave up since you had a boy’s body, but not anymore, right? You have a good reason to wear something cute now. There’s nothing to be ashamed of about wearing frilly things.”

“L-lay off!”

Pete went white as a sheet and hid behind Oliver.

Chela crossed her arms thoughtfully. “Of course, it’s up to you…but you do have the option to make the most of this trait. The great sage Rod Farquois, a fellow reversi, was famous for his many male and female lovers. I hear that nonmagical society is rather heteronormative, but relations are much more varied in magical society. There’s certainly no need to be shy or avoidant of it.”

“Wha—?”

Pete was reeling from this information.

Unable to watch any longer, Guy intervened. “Leave him be, girls. His brain’s about to short out. I mean, you guys keep talking about uteruses and testicles, and like…”

“Hey, Guy’s blushing! Perv! Perv!”

“Shut up! Maybe I’m just not completely shameless!” Guy spat back as Katie jeered, and they were once again at each other’s throats. This was the usual pattern, so no one attempted to stop them. Just then, a voice from outside their circle spoke up.

“You all seem to be ’aving fun. No idea what you’re babbling about.”

Chela’s sound dampening spell prevented sound from escaping their bubble but still allowed outside sounds to reach them. Everyone stopped talking and turned to the source of the voice—Oliver was shocked to see him again so soon.

“Mr. Rossi. What are you doing here?”

“Aw, no need to be so tense, eh? I just came to complain. I am not your enemy any more.”

Sensing the tension in the air, Rossi raised his hands to indicate he was no threat.

Chela, who had been on guard after dispelling the sound dampening spell, relaxed a bit.

“I lost more than once last night. I still ’ave medallions left, but what is the point, eh? I ’ave seen my limits and lost my motivation. So I withdraw.”

“More than once? Did you duel someone else after me?”

“Yes. Do not look at me like that, Oliver. ’alf the allotted time for this battle royal has been spent. Only the strongest are left. I expect you will beat most of them. But watch your back, because some of them are *really* strong.”

Rossi dropped his carefree attitude to deliver a solemn warning. Oliver, unable to understand what his goal was, fell silent. Then a grin returned to Rossi’s face, and he shifted his gaze to the Azian girl.

“That goes for you, too, Nanao. Show me what you can do. I’m a big fan of yours.”

He grabbed her hand and shook it vigorously. Then he quickly turned on his heel.

“Well, good-bye. Thought I should go see Instructor Garland during lunch today, eh? See you soon, Oliver. I will retrain myself, then be back to challenge you again.”

He raised a hand and strode off. Once he was gone, Chela nodded in understanding.

“…I see. So you beat him last night, did you? I figured Mr. Rossi wasn’t going to be a pushover, so very impressive, Oliver.” Chela cast the dampening spell again and listened with rapt attention, asking for more detail.

“Yeah, he’s really strong. He has something I don’t.” Oliver recalled their duel from last night.

“Oh, right! I have something to discuss with all of you as well.”

Katie spoke up during a lull in the conversation. She paused, then continued with a serious tone.

“What do you think about getting our own secret base? Want one?”

The five of them could hardly believe their ears.

Guy, not catching her drift, cocked his head suspiciously.

“…If I had to choose, I’d say I’d want one. But where’d this come from?”

“No, I get it. She’s suggesting a shared workshop,” Oliver interjected.

Guy nodded, and Chela jumped in to further explain.

“It is, quite literally, a workshop shared by multiple students. It’s not uncommon at Kimberly. However, only a handful of senior students are allowed by the academy to have one on campus. An exception for first-years with no accolades like us would be…”

She recognized on some level what Katie’s suggestion meant and tried to be vague in her wording.

Instead, Oliver said it for her. “…You want us to set up an unofficial workshop in the labyrinth, don’t you?”

Guy and Pete went stiff with shock. Katie, aware of everyone’s eyes on her, nodded.

“Yeah, that’s it. But we wouldn’t be starting from scratch. I already have a place in mind. It’s got most of the essentials, and it’s on the first layer.”

She seemed to have something very specific in mind.

Understanding, Oliver put a hand on his chin. “Right… Ms. Miligan’s workshop, huh?”

“WHAT?!” Guy blurted out hysterically.

Katie quickly followed up before he could say any more. “She has multiple bases within the labyrinth, not just the one I was taken to. As an apology for what she did, she offered to give me one. And since the area’s been a workshop from the beginning, the environment is perfect. I don’t think it’s a bad idea, personally, but what do you guys think?”

No one spoke. Not because they had no objections, but because it was difficult to settle on just one thing to complain about first. Dozens of seconds passed in silence, until eventually, Guy retorted:

“A-are you crazy? This is a workshop created by Miligan! Can you even imagine what she used it for?”

“She claims it hasn’t been used for her demi-human experiments since she was having difficulties with the supply route. Honestly, I don’t know how much of what she says is true. I could list my doubts for days, but my initial impression is that it’s clean.”

Katie answered him plainly, as if she’d been expecting this question. Guy opened his mouth to argue, but she spoke over him.

“If we don’t take advantage of this situation, it’ll be impossible to have a workshop as first-years. Of course, I’m aware that I can’t maintain it on my own. So I want to rely on you guys. Will you help me manage the workshop Ms. Miligan gave me? You can use it for whatever you want!”

Her desperation to persuade them seeped into her expression as Katie continued her proposal. Oliver studied her, his face stony.

“It is certainly tradition for Kimberly students to set up workshops within the labyrinth. However, that’s usually in their third year, or in the latter half of their second year at the earliest.”

“For first-years, the risk of descending into the labyrinth far exceeds the advantages of having a workshop. If you can’t protect yourself, it’s not even worth discussing. Katie, you understand this, don’t you?”

Chela chose her words to be as convincing as possible.

Katie dropped her eyes to the ground and asked, “An average of eight hundred twenty a year… Do you know what that number is?”

It was an odd question. The five of them couldn’t answer, so Katie continued:

“It’s the number of demi-humans exploited and destroyed by this academy. They’re used as research material, toys for amusement, and a

bunch of other things—but this is only the publicly stated figure. It's bound to be much higher if you include the incidents that go unreported. And if you add magical creatures beyond demi-humans, it's impossible to imagine just how high that number balloons to."

Oliver swallowed. He'd never heard this number before.

Katie scowled. "It would be different if every sacrifice was absolutely necessary. But the truth is, they aren't. The students and faculty here treat magical creatures with such terrible indifference and kill them needlessly. They don't even attempt to respect the lives of nonhuman beings."

She'd experienced this attitude more times than she cared to remember since starting at Kimberly. Katie looked up sharply.

"I want to change that trend. But I can't change anything shouting on my own. So first, I want to win an award as a researcher, with a focus on interspecific communication. I want to find a symbiotic, sustainable relationship between us that can replace this one-sided abuse for resources."

Chela folded her arms in thought as she listened to Katie explain her vision.

"Interspecific communication? I hate to admit it, but this is the first I'm hearing of such a field."

"I'm not surprised. It's hardly a major field. I searched every part of the library I was allowed into, and I could only find three books on the subject. Right now, I'm just scrounging through old student essays, but at least it's something."

Katie smiled sadly, her tone hardly hopeful. But her strength returned with her next words.

"You could also look at it as an untapped gold mine. If I really dig, I'm sure I'll discover something new. Which is why right now, I want to start building up experience as soon as I can. I want to further my studies through a healthy exchange with these living beings, not whatever that witch calls a 'class'!"

Oliver could sense the depths of her passion from the power in her tone. Katie Aalto wanted to find a different path from the one Vanessa Aldiss taught.

"To be very clear, I want a place under my own control where I can raise magical creatures. That's the purpose I want to use Ms. Miligan's workshop for. But I can't do it on my own, so I'm asking for your help. I know this is blunt…"

She trailed off. Her ideals were grand, but she seemed constantly tormented by her lack of power to realize them.

"I'm sorry for being selfish. Honestly, I know it would be natural for you to refuse. I don't even know if any of you want a workshop at this point. So if you have reservations, just turn me down right now. I'll find another way —"

"Count me in."

Nanao couldn’t wait for her to finish. The other five looked at her in surprise, so she continued without hesitation.

“I do not know what exactly a workshop is. However, from what I can tell, Katie wants to claim territory within the labyrinth, yes? Then as a warrior, it is my job to protect the castle. Please take me under your banner, milady.” She stood in front of Katie and gripped her hands firmly and encouragingly. “Have confidence, Katie. The light of determination is in your eyes. And it has only grown brighter since meeting that troll. One day, I wish to see that light illuminate the darkness. And that is well enough for me to join you.”

“Nanao…” Overcome with emotion, Katie hugged Nanao with tears in her eyes.

Guy smiled awkwardly. “…Guess I’m in, too. It’s not the first time you’ve dragged me around by the nose. And…the idea of my own garden is tempting.”

“Guy!”

The tall boy flashed a toothy smile. After a bit of silent thought, Chela and Oliver exchanged a look, then spoke in turn.

“…Very well, count me in, too. There are many strong-willed people here at Kimberly, and those wills take many forms. It is the mark of a good friend to support one who is trying to move forward.”

“I figured this might happen as soon as Nanao agreed. But let me say one thing: Everyone’s safety comes first. If anyone is threatened, then we abandon the workshop. If you’re okay with that, then I’m in, too, Katie. What do you say?”

Katie nodded repeatedly, then glanced over at their last friend, Pete.

“Are you…out, Pete?”

Her eyes were filled with hope, yet also prepared for the worst. After a few seconds of silence, he sighed dramatically. “…What’s the point in asking when you’ve already taken away my options? I can hardly even take care of myself right now. If Oliver and Chela are in, then I obviously have to go along with this.”

He snorted and looked away. Katie tackled him with a hug around his torso.

“Thank you! I love you guys…!”

“Uwah! D-don’t hug me!” Pete struggled, eventually peeling her off.

“…You’ve got quite a chest,” she said quietly. “You should probably wear a bra.”

“No one asked you!”

Pete covered his chest with his arms and hid in Oliver’s shadow.

Chela watched them warmly, then thought of something. “You’re certainly thinking very far into the future, Katie. I had no idea you had such grand aspirations as research, accolades, and reform. I simply thought you were going to join the civil rights movement on campus.”

“Oh, them… Yeah, I’ve checked them out. But to say they’re my allies, well… We’re very different.” She gave a dry smile as she recalled the people she’d met. “…It was like a bunch of Miligans, but different. Does that make sense?”

No one tried to ask for further details. Oliver took a breath, then decided to change the subject.

“If that’s settled, then we should get moving. Let’s all go together to claim the workshop. Does two nights from now work?”

No one objected. And so their adventure began.

Once lunch was done, it was time for their afternoon lessons, and the students gathered in the alchemy classroom with their textbooks on their workbenches. A majority of them, however, shared the same concern.

“…Instructor Darius isn’t coming today, either, is he?” Guy whispered under his breath, and everyone grew visibly uncomfortable. Indeed, the alchemy instructor, Darius Grenville, had simply vanished.

“You think what they say is true? That he went missing in the labyrinth?” said Guy.

“It’s hard to say. A student would be one thing, but it’s difficult to imagine that happening to a faculty member. Oliver, what do you think?” Chela innocently inquired.

Oliver responded without letting his true feelings rise to the surface. “I hear that only instructors maintain the lowest depths of the labyrinth. If an accident did occur, even they could be taken unawares. It’s just one possibility, however.”

He did his best to give his usual, flat response so as not to arouse suspicion. Fortunately, no one suspected anything.

At this point, Pete joined in on the conversation. “I’ve heard a lot of other phony-sounding rumors, too. Like there’s infighting among the faculty, or that he was killed by a mage with a grudge against Kimberly.”

“Pete, don’t talk such nonsense,” Chela scolded. Kimberly was a breeding ground for endless numbers of such rumors, but carelessly digging into them was a surefire way to shorten one’s life span.

“Hmm, I wonder what really happened.”

A voice suddenly came from above them. The students looked up in surprise to find a man standing upside down on the ceiling. Golden curls were draped either side of his head, just like Chela’s.

“Father?!”

“Uncle!”

Two voices shouted in unison. One was Chela, while the other was Stacy Cornwallis on the other side of the room. The man did a half flip and landed on the ground, then instantly gave the girl in front of him a tight embrace.

“Yes, it’s your daddy! How long has it been, Chela? You’ve gotten so much prettier in the short time I’ve been away.”

Chela accepted the man’s overbearing embrace—but only for five seconds. “This is not the time or place! Where on earth have you been?!”

“Oh, all over. I know I’ve been busy. I’m sorry for making you feel lonely.”

“There’s someone else you ought to apologize to first!”

Chela admonished him, indicating her friend, Nanao, by her side. Readjusting his clothes, the man turned to her.

“Yes, of course. It’s been six months since I last saw you. Are you having fun, Nanao?”

“I am. I’m glad to see you are healthy as well, Lord McFarlane.”

She smiled and chatted pleasantly with the man.

At that moment, Oliver and the others recalled the story she’d told them of how she’d come to their academy from the faraway land of Azia. Of the mage who had discovered her on that Yamatsu battlefield.

“I can’t believe you, dragging her halfway across the world, teaching her the language, and then abandoning her! Do you have any idea how much she’s suffered since school started?”

“I was slightly concerned about that, but I knew you were in her class. I knew she’d be all right.”

“What father drops all his responsibility on his daughter? You never change!”

Chela’s tone became increasingly aggressive as she began lecturing her father.

The man tempered her rage with practiced hands as he studied Nanao.

“You’re looking well, Nanao. I see you’ve had many more wonderful meetings aside from my daughter. Are you her friends?”

He turned to Oliver and the others. They each made to introduce themselves, but the man flicked his gaze to the podium.

“I’d love to stay and chat, but I am technically here to lead the class. Maybe another time. Ah, Ms. Cornwallis. I’m glad to see you are well, too.”

He called out to the other girl staring at him, then lazily strode to the podium. Upon reaching it, he scanned the room.

“Now, let me introduce myself. I am Theodore McFarlane, a part-time lecturer for Kimberly. I don’t teach any subject in particular. Instead, I run around filling in for the other instructors. I hope we can all get along.”

He introduced himself breezily. One of the students shouted a question.

“Excuse me! Does that mean you’re going to be our alchemy instructor from now on?”

“No, my role is only to be here for a few classes. I may be an instructor, but most of my job occurs outside this academy. I cannot stay on campus for long.”

“Then will Instructor Grenville be coming back?”

The ringlet instructor sighed slightly at this name. “If he comes back alive. But I suspect we’ll never see him again.”

The students all swallowed. He’d just implied that the mage Darius Grenville was dead.

“Just so you know, it’s not uncommon for mages to go missing. But when you’ve lived in this world for as long as I have, you just know. This is one of those times where the missing party doesn’t come back. I’m not a prophet, however. It’s just a feeling.”

A chill went down Oliver’s spine. Calm down. There’s no way he could have caught on already. I wasn’t that careless, he told himself.

“That said, the headmistress has already reached out to his replacement. For those of you who were Darius’s apprentices or were hoping to become one, you have my deepest sympathies. But I guarantee your next alchemy instructor will be amazing, too. You’ll just have to put up with me until they arrive.”

Theodore changed subjects, preventing anyone from bringing up Darius anymore. Relieved, Oliver scolded himself. *Don’t let down your guard. This man mustn’t be underestimated.*

“Now, shall we begin? Errr, what was today’s lesson…? ‘A chuckleshroom antidote’? Hmmm.”

An odd look came over Theodore’s face as he flipped through the textbook. He thought for a few seconds.

“Making this the normal way would be so tiresome. Okay! When you finish making your antidotes, give them to me, and I’ll drink them.”

The students stared at him in horror. He didn’t seem to care.

“I’ll grade you based on its quality. I’ll also give you detailed criticism, of course. Everyone have their tools on their desks? Then begin!”

He clapped his hands and signaled for them to start. As he watched the students frantically get to work, he continued to speak.

“It’s not a difficult recipe, so you can afford to listen to me chat, right? Oh, this latest adventure of mine was wild. Have any of you read my series Journey to the East?”

A blond girl in the corner of the room shot her hand up.

“I’m currently taking my time with Volume Twelve—”

“I’ve read them all!” Pete raised his hand at practically the same time and shouted as well. The instructor ignored the shocked Cornwallis—the blond girl—and zeroed in on Pete.

“Wonderful! My travels are funded by the sales of my books, so you’ve been keeping me fed! May I have your name?”

“Pete Reston, sir!”

“Pete, eh? Okay! I’ve committed it to memory. I’ll bring you back a souvenir next time.”

He walked over to Pete’s workbench to observe him eagerly mixing his antidote.

“I wrote that series based on the energy and spirit of my destinations. It’s not very helpful in learning the true feel and the culture of the land. On my most recent journey, I even found that many things I wrote needed to be corrected.”

The ringlet instructor put a hand to his brow in reflection.

“Like what…?” Oliver asked, continuing to tend to his antidote.

“Mm, for example, the food item known as *soba* in Yamatsu. In Volume Three, I stated, ‘It is a cold noodle dish with a very delicate flavor and is served with a very salty cold soup.’ But I was mistaken. That wasn’t a soup; it was a sauce! And you don’t pour it on the noodles; you lift up the noodles and dip them in!”

He shoved a hand in his coat pocket and retrieved two long, thin sticks. He gripped them between the fingers of his right hand.

“Also, this is how you hold chopsticks. Clever, isn’t it? You grab your noodles like this…then slurp them up in one mouthful. The manners are different there, so it’s fine to make lots of noise.”

He mimicked eating soba for them. Guy, half in disbelief at the foreign food culture, turned to the girl next to him.

“…Is that true, Nanao?”

“Indeed. That reminds me, I haven’t had soba since coming here.”

“Got a hankering? Good, good. Then I’ll bring some back for you next time,” the instructor casually promised as he continued down memory lane.

Chela listened in sulky silence, then eventually extinguished her cauldron’s flame. “…I’m done.”

“That’s my daughter for you! The cream of the cream of the crop!”

Theodore picked up the vial of finished antidote and swigged it, just like he’d said he would. Instantly, a mass of bubbles began frothing from his mouth.

“Blrrbllrbl!”

“Oh dear, I put too much bubblegrass in. My hand must have slipped thanks to all your irrelevant babbling.”

“*Blrggrble…!* M-my lovely daughter! This is more than just a ‘slip’!”

Theodore finally managed to swallow the bubbles and speak. Just then, a different voice spoke up behind him. “I am finished, too.”

“?! Wait, Nanao! There’s no way you finished that quickly—,” Oliver started.

“Okay! Round two!”

Before Oliver could stop him, the instructor chugged Nanao’s concoction. He gulped loudly, and a second later, tears came pouring from both his eyes like fountains.

“My eyes! My eyesss! Nanao, how could you? The bitterness of the crying onion hasn’t been tempered at all!”

“Mmm? Did I make a mistake somewhere?”

“It’s because you didn’t wash it in salt water after mashing it! How many times have I told you not to take shortcuts with the recipe?” Oliver lectured her as he quickly whipped up a vial of neutralizer.

Theodore took a whiff, and eventually, the tears began to slow.

“Ph-phew… Thank you. How many years has it been since I last cried like that? That was more intense than I expected. Um, remind me, how many more do I have to drink?”

“Only thirty-eight more, Father.”

“That’ll kill me!” he screamed in delayed realization.

Stacy glared at them, then raised her hand. “U-Uncle! I’m done, too!”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, yes.”

The man dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief, then strode over to her. Stacy was stiff as a board as he drank her finished antidote.

“Mm, well done. Evenly heated, and the ingredients were finely prepared, so it’s quite smooth. The taste is refreshing, too. I wouldn’t be surprised to see this sold in a store.”

“Y-you honor me! Um, I—”

“An A. Keep up the good work.”

He quickly graded her and then walked away without any further chitchat. Stacy stood there, all alone.

“Sir, I’m done, too!”

“Oh! Yes, Pete! I’ve got my hopes up for this one!”

Theodore went straight to the bespectacled boy and drained the vial, not bothering to study its contents. He savored the taste with a straight face, which all of a sudden transformed into an expression of pure joy.

“Oh, excellently done! It’s every bit as good as Ms. Cornwallis’s! I can tell from this antidote that you study very hard.”

“Y-you flatter me, sir!”

Pete blushed crimson from the praise.

But before his eyes, the light was fading from Theodore’s face.

“……”

“…S-sir?” Pete cautiously called out to his instructor. The man fell to the floor, hugged his knees, and then flopped on his side.

“……Life is full of despair… I wanna die…,” he began mumbling.

“Oh no!” Oliver cried. “He’s overdosed and is going into a sudden depression! He needs an antidote, now!”

“Seriously, are you a complete buffoon?” Chela chided her father. “Any medicine can become poison if you take too much!”

The two of them got to work trying to save their instructor. Before they got far, however, Guy grabbed the chuckleshroom sample from his workbench.

“If he’s overdosed on those antidotes, then shouldn’t he just eat the mushroom itself to cancel it out? Here, this one’s sliced real thin.”

“Wait, Guy! You can’t just—”

Before Katie could stop him, he’d popped the mushroom into Theodore’s mouth. He forced him to chew and swallow, and the man’s expression instantly relaxed.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! The sky is full of rainbows!”

“Crap, it was too effective!”

“Guy! You need to think before you act!”

The worsening situation made Oliver want to clutch his head. While they worked to get the class back on track, Theodore's mood constantly sank from the lowest lows to the highest highs.

Even after alchemy class was over and they'd moved to their next classroom, the six friends still couldn't stop talking about what had just happened.

"Your dad's a funny guy, isn't he?"

"Please don't bring him up anymore… I can feel the steam coming from my ears."

Chela covered her face in shame. This was new to everyone.

"He acts that way virtually all the time. People call him 'free-spirited,' but there's no denying he lacks the sense of responsibility needed in a parent or instructor. It causes me no end of suffering."

She sighed, regretfully reliving the experience. Next to her, Pete was nervously waiting for their sword arts class to begin.

"It's finally time for full-on duels…"

"Calm down, Pete. There's no need to rush."

Oliver tried to soothe him as they stood in their lines. Just then, Master Garland appeared before them in the usual giant classroom, garbed in a white cloak.

"Let us begin. Like I said last time, you will be including spells in your duels today. Thus, though you have been separated by experience in the past, I will be now be pairing you up at my own discretion. Many of you will be out of your league. Think of this as a learning experience."

With that out of the way, Garland began casting the dulling spell on everyone's swords as per usual. He then randomly chose one out of every three pairs of students to start their duels while the rest watched. The students stepped forward as he called them by name.

"…Ah."

"—Mm."

And so it happened that Pete and Stacy ended up as opponents. She'd left quite an impression when throwing her name into the ring for the battle royal, and so even he remembered her. They squared off at the one-step, one-spell distance.

"Pete's up against one of your relatives, right?" Guy asked Chela.

"…Yes. This will be a tough fight for him."

She watched their duel intensely. Oliver did the same. This was Pete's first chance to show the fruits of his work with his friends.

"The duel doesn't end with one point," Garland said. "Continue fighting until time is up. Now—begin!"

Garland signaled the start of the duel. Pete frantically readied his sword.

"Don't panic, Pete!" Oliver shouted from outside the arena. "Just focus on getting one point to start with!"

He cheered Pete on in an attempt to get him to loosen up.

Stacy's temple twitched. "'To start with'? …I see you underestimate me as well," she muttered, a sharp look in her eyes. She pointed the tip of her athame at her opponent. "Come, nonmagical spawn. I'll show you how outclassed you are."

Trying to keep from succumbing to her intimidation, Pete stepped forward in his midstance.

"Gah?!"

The moment he tried to swing, his opponent had already read him and caught him with a thrust. The impact sent him flying, and he landed on his back. Stacy looked down at him coldly.

"Stand up," she demanded mercilessly. "We've still got plenty of time left."

Pete gritted his teeth and got to his feet. Recovering his stance, he attacked his opponent, who did not seem fazed in the least.

"Haaah!"

She skillfully parried his attack, which was aimed at her wrist. Unlike before, when she'd countered his first strike, Stacy stayed on the defense this time. Pete unleashed a flurry of blows, which she blocked with ease.

She snorted. "…Your attacks are all over the place. Even for a beginner, you're awful. You haven't so much as a shred of sense."

She dodged a thrust and swept his feet. Pete lost his balance and fell to the floor dramatically. He then jumped up, irate.

"Pete, stay calm!" Guy shouted from the crowd. "This is a duel with magic, remember?"

"—!"

Pete snapped out of his rage. Right, spells were allowed now. There was no need to continue fighting within sword range. Changing his tactic, Pete jumped back.

Stacy exhaled with pity. "Fool. Do you really think you stand a better chance with spells?"

The two stood apart, glaring at each other for a second. Pete fired the first shot.

"Tonitrus!"

He chanted a lightning spell. As if to declare his intent for victory, he followed up with a second and third shot. But Stacy didn't even flinch. She continuously evaded the attacks, shifting to the side just enough to dodge and defending herself calmly with her athame, which was ensorcelled in oppositional magic.

"Were you even aiming? Tonitrus!"

She unleashed the spell while dodging. It shot right through Pete's reckless offense, piercing him mercilessly.

"Ah—gah!"

"Pete!" Katie shouted as Pete collapsed from the blow. This time, he didn't get up right away. He spasmed on the floor, his limbs paralyzed.

“Do you see now that you are outclassed?” Stacy asked frigidly. “‘I’ve read them all.’ Ha! Don’t get so full of yourself over one measly compliment!”

Her words were tinged with rage.

Guy furrowed his brow in confusion. “…? What’s she mad about?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think they’ve ever talked…”

“……”

Katie shared in his confusion as Chela studied the duel. Eventually, Pete recovered enough to stand, but it changed nothing. He desperately challenged her with sword and spell, but Stacy’s overwhelming skill repeatedly knocked him back down.

“There she goes again! I can’t watch this! Is it not over yet?!”

“No, wait, Katie,” Oliver said, grabbing her by the shoulder before she could jump into the fray. “He hasn’t given up yet. And…there may be hope yet.”

“Huh?”

“Ms. Cornwallis underestimates him. That’s her weakness.”

He carefully observed the battlefield as he spoke. Only he and Chela noticed the continuously burning tenacity within Pete’s eyes, despite his total inability to make a move of his own.

“You don’t learn, do you, weakling?” Stacy spat, bored with this endlessly repeating pattern. She still believed them to be at spell-casting range. But Pete charged at her full force.

“Yaaah!”

“—?!”

His mad dash caught her off guard. Stacy quickly shot off a lightning spell, but it missed, just grazing his head—because he’d leaned forward as far as he could when he ran. Sensing danger, Stacy instantly jumped back. Pete stuck out his right hand to catch himself from falling, then followed up with a thrust.

“—!”

“Guh…!”

Stacy’s eyes were wide, staring at the sword tip pointed an inch from her chest. Pete’s voice was filled with frustration. He’d been unable to bridge the tiny gap between him and his enemy.

“The Hero’s Charge, huh? That was close,” Oliver muttered.

The Rizett-style sword arts technique Hero’s Charge was a surprise attack that relied on an extreme forward lean to throw off their opponent’s judgment of distance.

Chela, who had taught him that move, nodded.

“Yes. Even Ms. Cornwallis couldn’t have expected that risky attack. Unfortunately, he lacked just a little bit of sharpness in his execution.”

It was a bitter experience for the both of them as well. Pete reluctantly got back into his stance. The silence was heavy.

“…Was that Michela’s idea?” Stacy finally muttered.

"……"

Pete said nothing. Accepting his silence as an affirmative, the girl twisted her lips in anger.

"…You all really piss me off!"

"That's time! Enough!"

Garland's voice echoed powerfully a few minutes later, and their duel came to an end.

"Huff… Huff…"

"You did well, Pete."

Oliver patted the panting boy on the shoulder. Pete bit his lip and looked down.

"I couldn't…get a single point…!"

Large tears dripped from his eyes. Oliver nodded, and Chela smiled gently. Those tears were proof that he'd never given up on the match through the very end.

"You have nothing to be sad about. There's always next time," said Chela.

"Yeah. Your opponent was really strong, too," Oliver added, then looked across the battlefield to where Stacy was angrily stomping the ground. The boy named Fay was standing next to her, and he calmly returned Oliver's gaze.

"Makes sense she'd want to participate in the battle royal, that Ms. Cornwallis. We can't underestimate her."

He honestly appraised her skill. Chela's expression, meanwhile, was quite complicated.

Two days later, after dinner was finished and the students had returned to their dorms, the six of them stayed on campus as promised.

"Everyone's here, then?"

On Chela's signal, they cast a sharpening spell on their blades and entered the mirror into the labyrinth. When everyone had landed in the hall, Guy scanned their surroundings.

"I just realized, this is the first time the six of us have gone into the labyrinth alone. I'm a little nervous."

"It's fine, it's fine! There's nothing to be scared of with all of us here!" Katie said brightly, but Oliver cut in.

"Sorry to kill the mood, but honestly, the labyrinth is chock-full of scary things. There are countless risks, like getting lost, being attacked by beasts, ending up injured by traps, or even running into other students."

"Urk!"

"On the first level, we mostly have to worry about the first and fourth items on that list," said Chela. "The higher we are, the more students there will be. I have encountered a malicious senior student before, and it was not pleasant."

"Unnngh!"

Oliver and Chela joined forces to temper Katie's boldness. Oliver then proceeded to explain their formation.

"Nanao and I will be at the front, and Chela will guard the rear. The three of you in the middle, stick together in a triangle formation. It might sound like overkill, but this formation should give us a solid defense in any direction."

"Okay… What if someone gets separated?" Pete asked.

"Don't try to move around in the dark. Just stay where you are and keep low. I promise we'll find you."

Pete nodded, and everyone formed up as Oliver had instructed. Once they were ready, Nanao addressed the group.

"Everyone is prepared, yes? Onward, then!"

Six pairs of legs set out down the hall. As Chela was bringing up the rear, she noticed a broom attached to the Azian girl's back.

"Nanao, you brought your broom? I doubt there will be many places to fly on the first level."

"That is fine. We are still getting to know each other, which involves spending time together."

Nanao smiled and gripped the broom's handle.

Oliver grinned. That was so like her.

Katie, who was walking in the middle, studied the bespectacled boy next to her.

"…Hmm? Pete, you're a boy today."

"H-how can you tell?!" Pete backed up in shock.

The curly-haired girl put a hand to her chin. "It's like…an aura? You seem calmer today, so I guessed."

Pete grumbled at this. Now that he was an awoken reversi, his biological sex would be unstable until he learned how to properly control it.

Oliver, as his roommate, had known this was a "boy day" since that morning.

"Katie, we'll be relying on you to guide us there. Where should we go first?"

"Um, I think it was straight down the right, then make a left at the third junction."

Katie explained their route. They followed her instructions, when all of a sudden, a group of small creatures cut in front of them. They were round, and their limbs diminutive.

"Oh! A nest of ball mice!"

"Stop. You can observe the wildlife at a later date."

Guy grabbed Katie firmly by the collar as she tried to go after the creatures.

She seemed miffed, so Oliver explained.

"Many of the magical creatures on the first level are small and timid. However, if you let down your guard, you can still end up being seriously hurt. For example, this crack…"

He drew his athame and thrust it into a crack in the wall. Instantly, giant pincers latched onto the blade. Oliver pulled the weapon back, dragging out a crustacean about as large as a medium-size dog.

“See? It’s a cracking-crab nest. Their pincers are super strong, and they can easily sever a finger if you stick your hand in. Be careful of cramped, dark spaces.”

“Ooh… That is a large, tasty-looking crab.”

“You’ve got an excellent eye, Nanao. They’re really good fresh and boiled in salt water.”

“Don’t focus on the food! Oliver, put it back already!”

Katie admonished him, and Oliver returned the cracking crab to its nest. Then the six of them started off again.

As they walked, Guy seemed to remember something.

“Say, doesn’t Kimberly have a Labyrinth Gourmet Club? Apparently, they gather creatures from down here and cook ’em up in search of new delicacies. Neat, isn’t it?”

“Not at all! I bet they make things like kobold sauté and troll stew!”

There was no arguing with Katie on that.

Next to her, Pete sniffed the air. “…Is it just me, or does something smell good?”

“No, I smell it, too. It’s very fragrant, like something being cooked.” Chela suspiciously agreed. Bewildered, they turned the corner and found the source.

“…Mmgh?”

“What, first-years?”

Several faces turned to look at them. About ten students were sitting around a fire in a makeshift plaza set up in the hall. Half of them looked to be first-years, and the other half were second- to fourth-years. Unsure if they could pass by in silence, Oliver hesitantly greeted them.

“…Good evening. Um, what are you doing?”

“We’re the Labyrinth Gourmet Club, and this is our new-member welcoming party! Wanna join?!”

The oldest boy stood up and beckoned them over. Just then, another student came running from the depths of the hall. In their hands was a creepy, reddish-black mass.

“Sir! I found this massive leech! Can we eat it?”

“You’re a real challenger, newbie! Okay, let’s try cooking it!”

“Sir, should I be worried? My vision’s going blurry! Was it that mushroom I ate earlier?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Here, have some antidote! You’ll throw up blood and die if you don’t!”

The Labyrinth Gourmet Club chatted exuberantly about disturbing things as they barbecued their meal.

Oliver bowed. “…Seems we’re in the way. We’ll be going, then.”

The six of them edged around the area and left as quickly as they could. Once around the corner and out of earshot, Katie finally spoke up.

“I told you it was full of weirdos!”

“Oh, lay off! It’s no different from those random-flavored drinks at the store!” Guy argued.

Chela glanced behind them. “Labyrinth dining ethics aside… The one who invited us to join the club is quite famous.”

“Ah, I thought so. So that’s Kevin Walker, the Survivor?” Oliver nodded in understanding.

Guy looked crestfallen. “Really…?! Aw, man! I shoulda stayed to chat!”

“What? Is he a big fish or something?” said Katie.

“Of course,” replied Chela. “I heard he spent half a year lost in the labyrinth’s depths, and the academy pronounced him dead. They even held his funeral, but then he came back alive!”

“Half a year? Here? Impossible. No one’s that tough…,” Pete scoffed.

“He missed his graduation thanks to that, so he’s still a sixth-year currently. I dunno what he might have fed us, but it could’ve been interesting to join that barbecue.”

Oliver was half joking. Katie shook her head furiously, but Chela looked somewhat wistful.

“Yes, they seemed to be having fun. So that’s called a barbecue?”

“? Chela, have you never been to one before?” Oliver asked.

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but no… At my house, we never ate or cooked outside the kitchen.”

“Aw, you’re missin’ out!” said Guy. “All right, let’s have a barbecue soon. We could do it in the workshop, right?”

“Sure, but don’t get any funny ideas about the food. I refuse to go hunting in the labyrinth.”

Katie sharply put her foot down. Soon, everyone stopped in their tracks. Before them stretched a long, narrow hall—and covering the walls, ceiling, and floor were giant slugs.

“Ugh, it’s a den of slugs!” Guy groaned. “Hey, can we find another way?”

“Why? They won’t hurt people,” Katie said, puzzled.

She easily stepped into the hall, and the sole of her shoe squelched in the slime.

“Let me through, guys. Sorry!”

She gently yet boldly pushed aside the slugs in her way and continued forward. Her five friends stared in disbelief as she reached the other end of the hall in no time at all.

“See? I made us a path. It’ll close soon, so hurry up!” she shouted, indicating the space she’d cleared. Forced to act quickly, the group flung themselves one after another into the hall. None of the slugs attempted to harm them, and they safely made it to the other side.

“Easy, right?”

“…Save for the fact that my trouser cuffs are all smelly.” Guy looked down at his slimy clothes in disgust.

Katie ignored him and dropped her gaze to the floor. “It’s their reproductive season. If you look closely, you can find babies, too. Here, see? So small and cute!”

“Whoa! Don’t let ’em crawl on your hand! Put it back on the ground!”

Guy jumped back as she held out the baby slug for him to see.

Oliver, however, couldn’t shake a nagging feeling. “Hey, Katie, is it just me, or…are we seeing a lot of magical creatures on this route? We’re not in that deep.”

“R-really? Maybe that’s just how it is.” She quickly looked away.

Guy, sensing what was going on, furrowed his brow. “You little… Did you choose this route on purpose? Like maybe after asking Miligan about the wildlife distribution in the labyrinth?”

“Ha—ha-ha-ha! Of course not!”

Katie laughed robotically and then began walking again. Once she sensed everyone’s eyes boring holes through her back, she ultimately succumbed to the pressure.

“…I mean,” she mumbled, “isn’t a livelier route more fun?”

“So this *was* premeditated!”

“…Well, as long as we get there safely.”

Oliver sighed in resignation and followed Katie’s lead.

After another twenty minutes, the six of them reached another one-way hall.

“Oh, wait,” Katie said. “This place might be a *little* dangerous.”

“…Hold on. What d’you mean specifically by ‘dangerous’?” Guy asked apprehensively. Katie didn’t respond, instead taking out a ball of yarn from her bag and tossing it down the hall. Suddenly, nails flew out from every angle of the corridor, turning the ball into a pincushion.

“…Like that.”

“A *little*?! We’d be turned into hedgehogs at the first misstep!”

As Guy shouted at her, Oliver cautiously peered down the hall. Careful observation revealed countless small holes, about the size of a pinky fingertip, on the walls, floor, and ceiling. These were the source of the needles.

“It’s…not a trap. It’s a colony of bowshells.”

“Yeah… But the needles are small, so they can’t kill a human. They might sting a lot, but that’s it.”

“‘That’s it’? No thanks! …So how do we get across this?”

Pete sounded highly concerned, as he very well should. But Katie strode ahead of the group, full of confidence.

“Leave it to me. You just have to burn a certain type of incense, and they’ll go right to sleep.”

She produced an incense burner, placed it on the floor, and lit it with a fire spell. Once smoke began to rise, she also urged it down the hall with a bit of magical wind.

“Okay, there. Now we wait five minutes.”

She continued to maintain the wind spell. Relieved that she’d brought the proper equipment, the other five waited for the signal. After only a few minutes had passed, Nanao suddenly turned around.

“…? I hear a strange sound approaching us.”

The Azian girl cautiously peered down the hall in the direction they’d come from. Oliver turned as well; he heard something being expelled at high pressure as the corridor began to fill with white gas.

“Shoot—it’s a trap!” Oliver said stiffly. Water vapor was pouring out from the gaps in the walls and rapidly approaching them. If it really was steam filling the hall, then it would be scalding hot.

“Run, as fast as you can!” Chela yelled. “You’ll be burned terribly if it touches you!”

Sensing danger, Chela urged her friends to move.

Katie looked horrified. “Huh?! No, wait! The incense is still—”

“There’s no time! Go!” Oliver compelled them onward as well, and the six friends took off into the hall. If they wanted to avoid heavy, full-body burns, then they had no other choice. About thirty seconds of sprinting later, once they could no longer hear the steam, they finally stopped.

“*Huff! Huff!* W-we survived, huh? Oh, my heart…”

“You… You…”

Katie was relieved, but Guy’s voice trembled. The other five turned in shock to look at him.

“…What are you gonna do about my ass?”

“Uwah!”

Pete let out a scream at the sight, and the other four swallowed in unison. The tall boy stood there looking quite pitiable, with dozens of needles stuck in his butt.

Ten minutes later, thanks to Oliver’s help, all the needles were removed and his injuries healed. Guy’s rear was as good as new.

“Katiiiiie! I’ve got a bone to pick with you!”

“I’m sowwyyy! Fohwive meee!”

Of course, the pain was still fresh in his mind. Full of rage, Guy grabbed their guide’s cheeks and pulled them. Oliver didn’t try to intervene. Instead, he stood next to Chela and sighed.

“Some traps only activate for a group of people. Guy deserves our sympathy, but let’s take this as a learning experience.”

“Agreed. It certainly was terrible luck that the only place the incense didn’t reach was the path Guy took.”

The two of them took the lesson to heart. Guy, once he had finished punishing Katie, released her. He put his hands on his hips menacingly and snorted.

“Hmph… Okay, that’s enough for now. But don’t ever forget my ass’s sacrifice. Be more careful leading us from now on! Got it?”

“I-I’ll try my best…”

Tears welled up in Katie’s eyes from the pain as she resumed guiding the group to their destination.

“That said, we’ve gone quite far already,” Oliver remarked as he followed. “Shouldn’t we be arriving soon?”

“Y-yeah. We’re almost there. Just over this hill—”

Katie nervously looked at her map. But once they’d passed halfway through the hall, she suddenly stopped.

“Oh! Here it is! Stone… No, Caputalis!”

In response to her spell, the blocks that made up the wall rearranged themselves to create an entrance after a few seconds. Katie hopped through, and her friends followed.

“Good job, everyone! Now come on in! This is our secret base!”

She jumped for joy at their arrival. With a flick of her wand, she lit the crystal lamp on the ceiling. Her friends *ooh’*d in awe at the sight.

“Yeah, this is good.”

Oliver was the first to comment. The workshop was about ten yards wide and fifteen yards long, and three yards high from floor to ceiling; it was around the size of two double-bed dorm rooms. In the back were candles and a stove, surrounded by cupboards full of potion-making tools like cauldrons. On the left wall was a single door, and on the right wall there were two.

“Pretty well stocked, too,” Guy noted. “Might be a bit tight for six people, though.”

“Hee-hee-hee, you’d think that, wouldn’t you? But your worries are unfounded!”

Katie grinned as she proceeded farther into the workshop. She opened the left door and stepped into the dark space.

“This is the main room. Let me get the light—”

She flicked her wand at the ceiling like before. Suddenly, a giant lamp burst to life, illuminating the darkness. What expanded before their eyes was a room about ten times the size of the last one. Pete gaped at the high ceiling in awe.

“What in the world? It’s huge! Can we use this, too?”

“Of course! According to Ms. Miligan, this is a top-quality workshop despite being on the first layer.”

Katie spoke proudly, and the echoes of her voice in the vast space amplified the effect.

Chela walked around, checking off items on a mental list. “Yes, Ms. Miligan was certainly right about that,” she said. “There’s water, light, and a stove, not to mention they’re all properly housing elementals. We could start using this place as a workshop as early as tomorrow.”

“At least my ass didn’t get turned into a pincushion for nothin’.” Guy rubbed his butt bitterly. “Awright, then! Let’s divvy up the space! Where should I put my garden?”

“Calm down. Let’s write everyone’s wishes down on a piece of paper. I want to raise animals; Guy wants to raise plants. What does everyone else want to do here?”

Katie took out a notebook from her bag and began scribbling with a pen. The others looked at one another.

Oliver’s first instinct was to lay down the basics. “For now, I want to use this as a base for exploring the labyrinth. I’d start with making sure it’s satisfactory as a safe house and setting up some beds.”

“Oh? You mean to sleep here? That sounds rather exciting.”

“See? Nanao understands. That’s what a real secret base is,” said Guy. “I like the sound of this… Yeah! Let’s set up traps around the area! A base has to have tight defenses!”

“Like ass-stabbing ones?”

“Pete, you little—!”

Guy tried to grab Pete for teasing him, but the bespectacled boy took off. Chela watched as the two of them played chase in the spacious room. She couldn’t help but smile.

“…Heh-heh-heh.”

“? What’s up, Chela?” Oliver asked.

“Oh—I’m not sure why, but I’m feeling excited, too. Strange, isn’t it? I’ve never experienced this before.”

Chela’s expression was a mixture of joy and confusion.

“…We’d probably stay up all night talking about this,” Katie said quietly. “And it’s already late. If you all don’t mind, why don’t we…stay here tonight?”

No one objected, and so they all settled in to spend their first night in the secret base.

Once they decided to stay overnight, the six of them realized how hungry they were. Everyone had packed some food, but Guy argued that they needed something better for their first night in the secret base. They all agreed, and so everyone left the base to go on a food run.

“…Will we really find a store in the labyrinth?”

Once again, Oliver and Nanao took the lead, and they fell into the same formation they’d taken to get there. Katie expressed her doubts as they walked.

There were quite a few unofficial workshops in the labyrinth, similar to the one Miligan had given them. And with so many students spending so much time down here—in other words, using the labyrinth as a living space—many needs arose, which naturally led to goods being sold to fulfill those needs. That was the sort of “store” they were searching for.

“If we don’t find one, we can just do what the Labyrinth Gourmet Club does.”

“We have to find a store!”

Katie opened her eyes wide and scanned the area; she’d rather die than have their dinner table filled with magical beasts.

Oliver grinned awkwardly. If they did find a “store,” it was still highly likely that the things they sold would be derived from magical beasts. But for now, this thought didn’t seem to dawn on her.

“Hmm? What’s that?”

After searching the area around their base for a bit, they spotted a figure deep in a wide corridor. As they drew closer, they could see dozens of items sitting atop a cloth on the ground. The seller’s face came into view, and she looked up at the group.

“What’s this? Welcome! Can’t remember the last time a group of first-years darkened my door down here.”

The older female student’s intonation was certainly unique, and her large mouth left quite an impression. She wore her uniform smartly, and from the color of the lining of the robe around her shoulders, she appeared to be a third-year. She studied Oliver and the gang, then continued:

“Naughty, naughty, going out to play at night at such a tender age. You’ll desensitize yourselves. But I’m not in the business of picking my customers! Nee-ha-ha-ha! Go on, then. Whatcha looking for?”

They prepared for a lecture, but she quickly switched back into merchant mode.

Katie stooped down to look at her wares. “Wow, there really are stores down here in the labyrinth,” she said, impressed. “How do you keep stock?”

“Ain’t it obvious? Either you lug it down from the surface or make it here. A single vial of anti-itch ointment sells for three times what it does up top. Makes all the risk worth it!”

She gave that same curious laugh again. Most of her wares seemed to be potions, but Oliver noticed a big basket behind her that seemed to be stuffed full.

“Do you have any food?”

“Plenty, sure. You looking to just get by? Or maybe feeling a little festive?”

“Somewhere in the middle, I’d say. We’d be happy with something tasty.”

The girl turned around and began rummaging through the basket. From the mountain of items, she produced leafy veggies, root veggies, mushrooms, and meat for them to peruse.

“Take it. Since you’re first-time customers, I’ll offer you a special deal: three thousand belc for the lot.”

“Wait—for all this?”

Oliver was shocked. Considering where they were, he’d been prepared for food to be incredibly pricey. This was much more palatable than what he’d imagined. Picking up on his confusion, the seller grinned.

“I like reckless folk like you, descending this far into the labyrinth after only half a year at the academy. I hope you all survive and become regular customers.” Her “encouragement” was quite disturbing.

Oliver made to thank her, but she cut him off.

“But if you don’t, then I’ll have more fresh meat to sell. Either way, I win.”

Everyone except Nanao stiffened. The seller burst into laughter.

“Nee-ha-ha-ha! It’s a joke! A joke! Here, have some drinks on the house!”

The six of them returned to the base with their surprisingly easy-to-find dinner. Now came the question of cooking.

“…What kind of meat do you think this is?” Katie asked, studying the lump of red flesh.

“Probably lamb. Judging from the muscle, it’s at least not demi-human,” Guy answered while he checked the mushrooms next to her. As he was the person with the most experience with food, the group had left him in charge of checking to make sure it was safe.

“So what do we make? We’ve got enough for a feast.”

“Wait—you can cook, Guy?”

“Don’t expect anything fancy. But you can at least have faith that it’ll be tasty.”

The tall boy stood, rolled up his sleeves, and walked to the kitchen.

Katie jumped in next to him, smiling faintly. “Should I take that as a challenge?”

“Oh? I dunno, should you?” Guy responded, his interest piqued.

Sparks flew between them. A few seconds later, they’d grabbed knives and were furiously prepping their ingredients.

Oliver chuckled from behind. “…Guess we’re in the way, then. Nanao, want to train a bit before dinner?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

She immediately nodded, and they headed for the common room.

Chela turned to Pete. “In that case, Pete, why don’t we study for class? I noticed you were struggling in spellology.”

“Ugh… F-fine. Thanks.”

Nanao and Oliver faced each other in the center of the common room. Oliver was the first to speak.

“So…let me ask this first. Have you managed to reproduce it since then?”

He didn’t need to say what “it” was. Nanao shook her head, and the boy crossed his arms.

“I see… Strange. That certainly wasn’t the kind of move you just unleash by chance.”

“As I asked before, are you certain you’re not overthinking this?”

“No. If I was mistaken, there’s no way you could have defeated the cursed eye of a basilisk,” Oliver stated quite plainly. He was talking about

her duel with Vera Miligan, specifically Nanao's final blow—the seventh spellblade.

The fact that she'd even managed this was a secret between the two of them. Like Master Garland had stated in class, spellblade users never made a display of their techniques. Oliver had been very careful to remind her of this, so she didn't ignorantly let the truth slip.

"In any case, we'll just have to wait for it to come back to you. So until that happens, let's focus on spell practice."

With that, Oliver moved on to the next subject. He couldn't offer a single word of advice in regard to the spellblade. It was Nanao who had created it, and only she could recreate it.

So leaving aside the problems that were outside the realm of his ability, they focused on practicing the basics for a mage. First on the list was spellwork. As Oliver prepared to teach her as usual, Nanao grinned bitterly.

"This again? I don't mind, of course, but… Might we first cross swords for a bit?"

"No. Since you're in the battle-royal tournament, you need to at least be able to handle a spell duel. This is for your own safety, as well as a show of manners if you're going to continue attending this academy as a mage."

"Mm, you have a point. I understand."

Nanao nodded meekly at Oliver's advice. It wasn't that she wished to skip out on her magic lessons—she just wanted to cross swords with the person in front of her more than anything.

Oliver knew this; he smiled and drew his wand. "Don't worry. Your spells are getting more focused. You're almost ready to use them in a fight. Once you can do that, you'll have to learn to weave them in with your swordplay. It's my job as your teacher to lead you to that stage."

Nanao's expression clouded over as she drew her own wand.

"Then…once that's happened, you'll no longer teach me magic?"

She looked at him forlornly.

Oliver shook his head. "I'll continue to answer any questions you have, just like I do now. Only then we'll be equals as mages in both name and ability."

He looked into her eyes. Suddenly, she gripped her wand tighter.

"That…is exciting."

After an hour of practice, Chela called for them to come back, so they sheathed their wands and returned to the living room to find Katie and Guy standing proudly over their dishes.

"All done! What do you think?!"

"Eat up! Get it while it's hot!"

They sat down at the table. Aside from the brown bread, which they had every day, there were two dishes before them. Katie's was a tomato-based stew served in a giant pot. Guy's consisted of roasted meat and veggies covered in a thick, brown sauce atop a large plate.

"They…both look so good," Oliver marveled.

“Let’s tuck in, shall we?” said Chela. “To our first night in the labyrinth!”

The six of them clinked their cups of cider together. This was a drink made from fermented apples and contained a tiny bit of alcohol, which meant they could only enjoy it in the labyrinth where the normal laws didn’t apply. The sweetness of the fruit juice and sting of the carbonation pleasantly slid down their parched throats.

With their thirst quenched, the group finally reached for the food. Katie and Guy stared intently as their friends took bites from each dish. A few minutes passed in silence as they savored the flavors.

“…They’re both good,” Oliver muttered. “But if I had to declare a winner…”

His gaze moved toward the plate of meat and veggies.

Chela nodded. “Guy’s dish is a hair better, I’d say,” she noted. “Katie, your dish was superb, but this one has a deliciousness I haven’t experienced before… Um, may I have some more?”

Chela looked at Guy awkwardly. He beamed and helped her to seconds as Katie slumped over the table.

“I—I lost…?! My best dish was beaten by that unsophisticated mess?”

“Ha-ha! You just don’t get it, do you? This is our first meal after walking forever through the labyrinth. You gotta have fire-roasted meat after all that!”

“Rrrrrggghhhhh!”

Katie’s shoulders shook with anger, as she had no retort for that. It all made sense to Oliver now. Most likely, there wasn’t that much difference in terms of their cooking skills. However, Guy had prepared the perfect dish for this specific scenario. That was the camping style he prided himself on.

“My ass is still hankerin’ for some payback. Once dinner’s over, we’re competing with these—and you bet there’ll be a punishment for the loser!”

Guy retrieved a pack of cards from his bag and placed it on the table. His eyes gleamed; the night was still young.

When they were finished eating, they started playing cards. Over two hours passed in the blink of an eye.

“Phew, that was fun! Feels like ages since I last played that much. Thanks, Katie. This secret base is awesome!”

“If you’re really that grateful, then at least show a little more mercy!”

Guy leaned back into his chair languidly. Katie’s long, curly hair, which she was so proud of, was standing on end: the result of a spell after coming in last place. Her tresses, now distinctively defying gravity, looked exactly like a broomstick brush. Oliver struggled to suppress a fit of giggles.

“Th-that’s enough. Let’s put her back. Originale.”

He dispelled her bushy hair, and it finally returned to its original shape.

Katie cupped a curl in her hand and sighed in relief.

Oliver pulled out his pocket watch and checked it.

“It’s pretty late. We should get to sleep. That means setting up beds—does anyone have anything left to do?”

A few seconds later, Chela awkwardly raised her hand.

“Um, I have a suggestion. How about…a name?”

The five of them failed to understand what she was saying.

“…A name?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“For our group. Perhaps it’s a strange thing to suggest, but I’m having so much fun right now. It’s almost unbelievable. Which is why I’d like to make this special. This time, this space, this relationship… I want to give it a name, make it something tangible… I-is that odd of me?”

Her eyes wandered, unsure and quite unlike her usual self.

Guy crossed his arms and shook his head. “Not at all. A little overly sentimental, if you ask me, but that’s not a bad thing.”

“A name for the group, huh?” said Oliver. “I’d never considered it. Pete, got any ideas?”

“Y-you’re asking me? It’s too sudden; I…”

Everyone settled into thought except for Nanao. “My friends, may I ask you to draw your blades?”

She stood from her chair and unsheathed her sword. The others looked at one another, then hesitantly followed suit.

“Form a circle and hold them out straight. That’s right… Overlay them on top of one another.”

Six blades gently crossed; from above, they appeared like the petals of a great blooming flower.

“Where I come from, we call this a sword rose. It’s a display of friendship between warriors.”

“Oh, an Azian custom…”

“Do we swear undying friendship on it?”

“No, we swear nothing.” Nanao shook her head. The others seemed surprised, and she smiled. “We simply remember the shape of the flower that bloomed here today. No one knows where our allegiances may lie tomorrow, or who will be alive or dead beyond then. Warriors cannot speak of the future. All we can do is burn this moment clearly into our memories.”

Suddenly, it all clicked into place for Oliver. Nanao had come from a land embroiled in war. The warriors who threw themselves into battle had no idea when they might lose their lives, and so the act of swearing upon the future was seen as insincere. *Let’s meet again tomorrow.* Such an insignificant promise was too ephemeral for them; only the present was certain. And this girl named Nanao Hibiya had grown up amid such impermanence.

“……”

He realized that the same could be said of this group, who lived in the hellish world of Kimberly.

“Now at this moment, our flower has bloomed. No matter what the future holds, this moment will not change. Whatever fate or cruelty awaits, nothing can ever scatter the flower we formed here.”

Which was why Nanao could be so certain that the present was unshakable. With this flower expressing their warrior friendship, the six mages gathered together displayed their bond.

“Thus, the Sword Roses. That is what I’d name our group.”

The Azian girl finished her speech on the softest of notes. Silence fell between the six friends as her words seeped into their hearts.

“A sword rose, huh? It’s a little inelegant, but I like it.”

Oliver was the first to indicate his assent. Then one by one, the others nodded as well. Seeing that everyone was in agreement, Chela spoke up.

“Yes, very well. From this point on, we are the Sword Roses: an undying flower blooming in the corner of endless space and time.”

Under Chela’s solemn tone, they looked down at the shape they had made: the proof of their bond.

“All flowers bloom proudly, unafraid of the day their petals scatter,” she continued. “Let us be like them. Do not fight the scattering of our petals, nor the withering of our roots. Just bloom as brightly as you can in the present. These moments we create shall surely be more magnificent than eternity itself.”

Chela spoke with conviction, and silence fell again. They spent a long while without saying a word, until eventually, Guy interrupted.

“…Hey, Chela, you’re blushing.”

“So are you, Guy.”

“As if you’re one to talk, Pete!”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Katie’s cheeks are like ripened persimmons.”

“You’re just as bright, Nanao…”

“As are you, Oliver.”

They realized they were all blushing equally. Sheathing his athame, Oliver coughed.

“…The awkwardness will be hard to forget, at least.”

“Chela, would you call that special?” Katie asked.

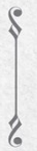
“Yes, more special than anything I’ve ever known… I’ve never felt my own words flow so uncontrollably before.”

“Scary how late-night excitement can get to you when you’re away from home. No one’s immune,” said Guy.

“…L-let’s change the subject! I’m dying here!”

Unable to bear the embarrassment, Pete forcefully shifted the conversation away. Everyone laughed and nodded. The six of them chatted for hours until they passed out from exhaustion.

CHAPTER 3



Three-on-Three

CHAPTER 3
Three-on-Three

"…Nuh?"

When Guy opened his eyes, an unfamiliar stone ceiling filled his vision. Shivering from a chill unlike that of the late autumn air he was used to, he slowly got up.

"Morning, Guy. Did you sleep well? Sorry the bed's not that great."

"…It's fine. I can sleep anywhere."

Oliver was already up; he handed his sleepy friend a cup of tea. Guy took a sip, then looked down at Pete, who was sleeping next to him. Last night, after learning they didn't have enough beds, the group spread blankets on the living-room floor and slept together in a huddle.

"…Hmm? The girls are gone. They sleep in a different room?"

"No, they woke up early and went out. They'll probably be back soon."

"Outside? Whoa, whoa, are you sure that's safe—?"

Worried, Guy got up and approached the exit. The moment he opened the door to look outside, a giant green face was there to greet him.

"Bwaaaaaaaaah?!

Dumbfounded, he jumped back dramatically. Next to the enormous demi-human's face, Katie's small body came into view.

"? What's wrong, Guy? Why'd you scream?"

"I-isn't it obvious? I opened the door to a troll's face! What's that about?!"

Guy protested as he held his hand over his racing heart. Oliver stood up cautiously, too—but not because of the troll crouched in the doorway. Behind Katie was an older student: the snake-eyed witch.

"…Miligan."

"Long time no see, Mr. Horn. Oh, don't be so tense. I'm not here to hurt you."

She raised a hand in a friendly gesture. Of course, this did nothing to persuade Oliver. He was still ready to draw his athame at a moment's notice.

"I'm just fulfilling my responsibility as the erstwhile owner of this place, and as Aalto's mentor. It'd be near impossible for first-years alone to transport a troll this far, so I'm helping a bit."

"Yes! Thank you, Ms. Miligan!" Katie said energetically

Seeing that the troll wouldn't be able to fit through the door, she and Miligan conferred for a bit and then left the room again. Oliver leaned out and saw the witch chanting a password at a spot farther away. A second

entrance to the common room opened, and this time, the troll's massive body fit easily.

"I knew it was quite generous of you to offer us a workshop for free… What are you really up to?" Chela asked suspiciously as she lined up alongside Nanao to observe them from behind.

Miligan grinned. "I'm investing in Aalto's potential. I believe in her talent. When she succeeds, I want to share in it—that's it. My motive is very simple."

Was she being forthright, or was it just a pretense to hide her true intentions? At the moment, it was impossible to tell. With the troll now settled inside, Miligan and the three girls returned to the room. The commotion had woken Pete up.

"…Pipe down… Is it morning already?"

Sleepy-eyed, he searched for his glasses with both hands. Someone offered them to him, though he couldn't see who. He accepted them, put them on, and was about to thank the stranger when he found a hand *staring back at him*.

"…Uwah! A—a hand?!"

Bewildered, he fell backward. No wonder—it was just a hand, missing everything from the wrist up, and it skittered along the floor on its five fingers. It ran over to Miligan, who scooped it up and placed it on her shoulder.

"Cute, huh? I had the genius idea of giving artificial life to my left hand, which Ms. Hibiya severed. You can all call her Milihand. Because it's my hand," she whispered with a chuckle.

Oliver frowned. Given a month, a mage could grow a new arm. However, it would take less than a day to reattach a severed one. He couldn't understand her reasoning for turning her own hand into a magical familiar.

"…I want be with Katie," came an awkward voice. The troll opened the door connecting the living room to the common room and peered through.

Katie ran over to it and nuzzled it. "Hear that? I couldn't just leave him with Instructor Vanessa, so I'm gonna keep him as my familiar for the time being. Oh, his name is Marco. I've also gotten the academy's permission, so don't worry."

She smiled as she explained. Nodding, Oliver approached the troll.

"He seems really calm. Do you remember us, Marco?"

"Remember. Oliver. Katie talk lots about you."

"Ah?! H-hey!"

The curly-haired girl tried to stop him, but Marco looked around at the others and continued.

"Guy. Pete. Nanao. Chela. Friends of Katie. So friends of me. Yes?"

It was an incredibly simple question.

Oliver couldn't help but smile and nod back. "Of course. It's nice to have you."

He extended his right hand, and the demi-human wrapped its massive hand over it. Guy watched them, his arms crossed.

“Feels weird, hearing a troll talk. Katie, I hope you’re planning to take responsibility for this fella.”

“Obviously, I am. You don’t have to remind me. I’ll take him out for walks, too. Now that he’s free from his cage, it’d be a shame to keep him cooped up and without any exercise.”

“…Wait a second. You’re gonna walk around the labyrinth with a troll?”

“He’ll be something of a bodyguard, which is killing two birds with one stone…but that’s bound to start rumors again,” Chela said with a pained smile. But no one attempted to tell the curly-haired girl to stop. Katie put her hands on her hips and stood proud.

“I don’t care anymore! Now, let’s go, everyone! Time for day two of our exploration!”

“Whoa!”

“Wha—? A troll?!”

“It’s huge!”

“Move aside! You’re blocking the way.”

They left the base and began exploring, witnessing a variety of reactions from the students they ran into en route. Most of the first-years turned and ran the moment they caught sight of the troll, as if they were still scarred by the incident during the opening ceremony. The older students, however, didn’t seem bothered at all.

“…Guess I shouldn’t be surprised that the older students aren’t fazed,” said Guy.

“It’s not uncommon to run into much larger magical creatures in the lower levels,” noted Chela.

“Conversely, a troll is pretty strong for the first layer. Maybe overly qualified as a bodyguard…,” Oliver began.

Suddenly, they heard a dull *gonk* from up above and looked up to see Marco’s head stuck on a piece of the ceiling.

“…And too big for these passages, as well.”

“That was really loud! Are you okay?!”

“Mm, fine. I no hurt,” Marco answered after bending down. Trolls were especially tough even among demi-humans, so there wasn’t even a bump. Even six months later, it sent a shiver up Oliver’s spine to think Nanao had knocked him out without so much as a bladed sword.

Ten minutes of walking and a few junctions later, they reached an area with a small protrusion in the middle: a reservoir full of blue water. Looking at the water’s surface, they could see into some sort of classroom. Miligan pointed at it.

“This is the closest labyrinth exit to your base. Jump inside, and the majority of the time, you’ll end up in a classroom on the fourth floor. The exit can shift, however, and might not always be usable. Keep that in mind.”

Guy cocked his head. “…Hmm? So wouldn’t it’ve been way faster to go this way first?”

“No, no. Anyone who wants to use that workshop has to at least be able to delve that deep on their own. That’s my requirement. And as I said before, this portal won’t always be available. You must always be prepared to think on your own two feet, if the need arises.”

The snake-eyed witch issued a stern warning. She was almost like a responsible older student lecturing her rowdy juniors; Oliver was still reeling at the difference between this Miligan and the Miligan they’d fought for their lives against. She slipped by them and began walking back the way they came.

“This is where I say good-bye, then. Enjoy your exploration. And don’t let your guard down.”

And with that, she disappeared around a corner. The six of them checked to make sure the portal was working, then nodded to one another and proceeded onward through the labyrinth. Marco, trailing behind, smacked his head against the ceiling.

“Argh, again…!”

“He’ll never be able to fit in narrower passages. I guess for today, it’s okay to stick to the larger ones. Personally, though, I was hoping to find some potion ingredients.”

“Which will be rare on the first layer, of course. It would be nice if we could go lower…”

They continued on, choosing the larger path at each junction. Careful not to get caught in any traps, the six of them gradually, gradually proceeded deeper into the labyrinth.

“…Mm? Hold on.”

As they were descending a slope, a gust of wind blew from up ahead. Picking up the scent of greenery, Chela ordered everyone to halt.

“…If we keep going, we’ll soon reach the second layer. Let’s turn back.”

“Oh, I see… Is the second layer really that different from here?”

“I’ve heard it’s leagues more dangerous. The first level is known as ‘the quiet, wandering path,’ while the second is called ‘the bustling forest.’ The area is much wider and the terrain more varied, and we’ll find far more types of magical beasts.”

“A forest…? There’s a forest in the labyrinth? But we’re under the academy.”

“Not only that—I’ve heard if you go deeper, there’s a *sea*. It would be more appropriate to think of each layer as a ‘realm’ than a lower level.”

Pete’s eyes went wide at the mind-boggling answer. The group turned around and started to head back.

“I’m not letting you leave, Michela.”

Suddenly, a threatening voice echoed, and two figures stood at the top of the slope they were ascending: a petite blond girl and a male student close by her side.

Chela called out to them. “Ms. Cornwallis, you’re exploring down here, too?”

“Hardly. We were lying in wait to steal your medallions!”

Stacy glared sharply at the six of them.

Sensing her hostility, Marco bared his great teeth from behind Katie. **“URRRRRRRRRRRR!”**

His growl echoed through the hall, and Stacy instinctively took a defensive stance. Katie tried to gently soothe the glowering troll.

“Whoa, whoa. Quiet, now. It’s okay.”

The troll’s anger slowly subsided with the help of her commands. Stacy frowned.

“…What a brutish beast. I thought we agreed there’d be no familiars?”

“How rude! I won’t set him on you. I’m not even participating in your little event!” Katie shouted back, insulted.

Fay sighed lightly and looked at his partner. “Calm down. She’s not gonna interfere.”

“I know that. I was only warning her.” Stacy showed no sign of shame.

Before the conversation could take an odd turn, Oliver expressed his own opinion.

“I have no intention of breaking the rules. Do you want to duel here?”

“That’s the idea. But I have a suggestion—how about a two-on-two?” Stacy confidently placed a hand on the shoulder of the boy standing next to her. “Fay shall be my partner. You all can select whichever pair you wish.”

“I see. So that’s what you want.” Chela nodded, then turned to her friends. “They wish to start a tag-team duel. Oliver, Nanao, what do you think?”

“Sounds rather interesting!”

“No, hold on a sec… Chela, those two have known each other a long time, right?” Oliver asked, and Chela nodded.

“You’re correct. They’re almost like master and servant. I don’t think I’ve ever seen them apart. They probably have excellent teamwork as well.”

“So they have the advantage, huh? It’s not the smartest idea to accept their challenge…”

“I know. But…it is interesting, isn’t it? How does our six months compare to their years of partnership?”

Chela flashed a fearless grin, while Oliver smiled awkwardly. He realized that fighting them head-on at their own game was certainly the sort of boldness he expected from her.

“Yeah… Then you and Nanao should pair up. I think Ms. Cornwallis is itching to duel you, and Nanao is excited as well.”

He looked to the girl at his side. Just like he’d said, her eyes were ablaze with the anticipation of fighting a strong enemy. It was clear she wanted to have at it right this minute. Chela calmly turned back to the two standing atop the slope.

“Two-on-two? We accept. Nanao and I shall take you on.”

And so the agreement was made.

Stacy sneered as all four of them reached for their athames.

“Not a bad plan, for a side character. Count me in, too!”

Suddenly, a boy’s voice grabbed everyone’s attention.

“Three-on-three. Wouldn’t that be much more interesting, Ms. McFarlane?”

“Joseph Albright…?!”

Stacy spun around and uttered his name in shock. There stood a large boy emanating an intimidating level of confidence. Oliver’s expression darkened further. From the boy’s necktie, Oliver could see this boy was a first-year like them, but he didn’t have the aura of one at all.

Chela studied the boy. “…So you finally made your appearance, Mr. Albright.”

“Another of your friends, Chela?” Nanao asked.

“No, I know him, too,” Oliver said. “He’s an Albright… They’re a famous family known for producing militant mages.”

He recalled the many dangerous stories he’d heard about the members of their family. Chela nodded.

“Since combat is so important to their family, the training they received at home differs on a basic level from all other students. There’s no doubt about it—he’s a leading candidate for the strongest in our year.”

As the daughter of a famous family herself, her words carried weight. Stacy, cautiously gripping her athame, turned to the unexpected intruder.

“…Three-on-three? Are you saying you wish to team up with us?”

“Would you prefer three-on-two-on-one? If it’s a brawl you want, I can play along.”

Albright spoke arrogantly, as if a numerical disadvantage meant nothing to him.

Stacy frowned, but he looked past her to the others down the slope.

“What say you, Ms. McFarlane and the samurai girl? Add in that nobody, and you’ve got three, technically. But if you think you can’t win with me on the opposing team, I guess that can’t be helped.”

He looked at Oliver and chuckled, as if scoffing at him.

Chela’s eyes glinted dangerously. “…Hold on. Who did you just call a nobody?”

“Well, that’s a tough question to answer. I don’t make a habit of remembering every nobody’s name. All I can say is that he’s standing next to you.”

Albright shrugged, continuing to use the word *nobody*.

Chela made to correct him, but Oliver placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Chela. I’m no punching bag, either.”

He raised his voice at the end, signaling that he was stepping off the sidelines and into the fray. He strode to catch up with Chela and Nanao, then glared at their opponents.

“We accept your three-on-three battle. Spells are allowed, I assume?”

“Wait! We haven’t accepted yet—”

“Stacy.”

Fay stopped his partner from panicking at the unexpected turn of events and brought his lips close to her ear.

“…Think about it. Albright’s after the samurai, and you’re after Ms. McFarlane. If he keeps her busy, then that’s good news for us. It increases our chances.”

“Mmgh…”

Stacy accepted his opinion and thought for a moment.

Albright paid them no heed. “Do whatever you want. But I have two rules I’d like to add. First, we cast our dulling spells at half efficacy. Second, once the duel is decided, the survivors take all the losers’ medallions. Agreed?”

Oliver frowned.

Albright continued to explain his position. “You don’t mind, do you? After all, none of us here are cowards who would drop out early and still try to reap the benefits of the team’s win, are we? If you want the reward, stay alive until the end. That’s all there is to it.”

“You’re not planning to strike down your own teammates in the middle of battle, are you?”

“If you’re that worried, we can add a rule to ban friendly fire. I don’t care what you do—as long as deadweight doesn’t share in the victory.”

Albright snorted haughtily at Stacy’s suggestion. He clearly had no faith in his own teammates. Oliver didn’t even need to confer with his friends on their response.

“Each team can decide individually on the distribution of medallions,” Oliver said stiffly. “None of us intend to interfere with that. But no matter how the battle turns out, our side will split the medallions evenly.”

“Ha! What a cheap reply. You really are a nobody.” Albright descended the slope, looking down his nose at Oliver. “Anyway, follow me. I’ll show you to our battlefield.”

“What? Where do you think you’re—?”

“Do you really want to fight in this narrow hall? Just shut up and walk,” he barked back at them without stopping to turn. Albright strode past Oliver and his friends, down to the base of the slope.

“Wait, Mr. Albright!” Chela shouted. “Are you actually planning to go to the second layer?”

“The Colosseum is so far. There are plenty of open spaces on the second layer.”

“It’s too dangerous! Perhaps if it was just us, but we also have our friends here!”

“Then send them home. Where do you think we are? You’re mistaken if you think a mage duel is a safe spectator sport.”

With that, he shot an overwhelming glare over his shoulder. Despite his unending arrogance, there was no denying his claims.

Chela thought for a bit, then turned to her friends. “It’s dangerous to go farther. Katie, take the others and head back to the base…”

“No way.”

“I’m not going.”

“Not happening.”

Katie, Guy, and Pete rebuffed her in unison.

Chela’s eyes went wide with shock as the three of them looked at one another.

“We’ll go back once we see you beat him black-and-blue. Right, Guy and Pete?”

“Yeah. We can protect ourselves. Don’t worry.”

“I’d love to take your place and duel Ms. Cornwallis…but I wouldn’t stand a chance at the moment, so at least let me observe.”

“Unh—it okay. I protect all.”

They made their appeals, and the troll reminded them he could help, too.

Fay loosened his lips slightly as he watched them. “She’s got a lot of friends, doesn’t she?”

“Shut up, Fay!”

He shrugged at Stacy’s outburst, and they began descending the slope after Albright. Oliver’s group nodded to one another and followed suit.
Albright led the way, with Stacy and Fay in the middle and Oliver’s group in the back. Keeping an unusually wide distance between themselves, they proceeded for about ten minutes before the space around them suddenly opened up.

“This is the second layer, also known as the bustling forest. Am I the only one who’s been here before?”

Albright took the first step into the layer and spread his arms wide to draw attention to their surroundings. The place wasn’t merely vast; it was entirely different from the area they’d just left. The stone floors and walls had been replaced by dirt and grass with trees sprouting everywhere. This layer was teeming with life. The domed ceiling high above their heads and the wideness of the room itself created a sense of freedom that they couldn’t have dreamed of on the first layer.

“It’s said that descending this deep during your first year is suicide—but this is simply a measure of mediocrity. It doesn’t apply to those with nonstandard talent. Don’t you agree, samurai?”

Albright looked directly at Nanao. Oliver narrowed his eyes—he could tell that while Albright considered him a nobody, he also felt a bit of kinship toward Nanao and Chela. The talented and the mediocre—his system of values split humanity into these two categories.

Infuriated at the thought of continuing at Albright’s pace any longer, Stacy attempted to regain control.

“That’s enough grandstanding, Mr. Albright. This is our fight. We’ve generously let you join, but don’t you dare weigh us down.”

“Fine, if you insist. The samurai, however, is mine.”

He seemed extremely serious about this. The six combatants walked to the center of the area and cast the dulling spell on one another's blades, and then Albright took out a coin.

"And—begin!"

He flicked it into the air. From a distance, Katie, Guy, and Pete watched with bated breath. The coin rose, and as it began to fall, everyone reached for their athames.

"Hah!"

The instant the coin hit the ground, Oliver dashed forward. The closest person to him in a straight line was Fay—but instead, Oliver boldly cut horizontally in front of him and stood before Albright.

"Hmm?"

"I told you, I'm no punching bag."

He faced off against him in a midstance, emanating ferocity. Nanao and Chela knew exactly what he was about to do.

"I'm your opponent, Mr. Albright. Once this duel's over, you'll remember my name."

"Ha! Tough talk for a nobody."

Albright raised his sword up and to the right. Blade high in the air, he struck a figure so imposing that many opponents would fold before he even swung. Rooted in unwavering confidence, it was the perfect depiction of a strong man's stance.

"Whew…"

Oliver faced down the leading candidate for strongest first-year student head-on. Chela had to tear her eyes away to focus on her own fight. She and Nanao stood across from Stacy and Fay.

"This is our first time fighting together, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Finally, I'll get to see your sword in action, Chela."

"Heh-heh. I'll be sure not to disappoint."

Stacy drew back in a midstance, twisting her wrist to form the lightning stance—a perfect match for the thrust-focused Rizett style.

Seeing how serious she was, Nanao also assumed a doublehanded overhead stance.

"…Say, Albright seems to be dueling with Horn," Stacy complained to Fay, their plans thrown off-kilter as soon as the battle had begun.

"Sorry, I didn't think Horn would approach him directly."

"Useless!"

But despite the squabbling among the partners, their stances were rock-solid. One was in the lightning stance like Chela, while the other was in the lower "earthquake" stance. Each was a student of the Rizett style, but it was easy to imagine how different their techniques were.

"No use crying over spilled milk," said Fay. "So what now? Support Albright and take down Horn first?"

“…Whatever. This just puts us back to the original plan. We’ll defeat Michela. Leave Albright to his own devices. I doubt he’d even attempt to work with us.”

Stacy focused on the fight at hand. Albright had never been part of her calculations. All she could rely on was herself and the attendant she’d spent half her life with.

“It’s time, Fay. Take care of the samurai first.”

“Understood. It won’t be easy, but I’ll manage,” Fay quipped, then glared sharply at Nanao. Chela took a step toward her own glowering opponent.

“How long has it been since we last crossed swords, Ms. Cornwallis—?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. I’m not here to chat.”

She cut her off frankly.

Chela’s expression sank with dejection. “I see you have quite the grudge against me. Might I ask why?”

“…What difference would it make even if I told you?”

She curtly shot the conversation down. Neither side said a thing as they silently inched toward each other.

“Haaah!”

The moment they breached the one-step, one-spell distance, Stacy took off like a loosened arrow. Repelling the incoming thrust, Chela flashed a confident grin.

“An excellent thrust. Now—have at you!”

And with that proclamation, sparks flew as they began exchanging blows. Parrying with optimal efficiency, they naturally moved into counterthrusts; over the next few seconds, more than a dozen thrusts were exchanged. Their duel was graceful and exquisite, yet also surprisingly fierce. The white-hot struggle continued, with neither side giving ground. Nanao let out a sound of awe.

“Ohhh, beautiful. Truly a clash between peers.”

“They were always fated to fight, though Ms. McFarlane doesn’t wish to.”

Fay sighed. He displayed none of Stacy’s ferocity as he pointed the tip of his athame at his opponent.

“Haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? I’m the Cornwallis guard dog, Fay Willock. Before we begin, I must apologize—this won’t be an enjoyable duel, Nanao Hibiya.”

“Hmm? What do you—?”

“Fragor!”

Fay interrupted Nanao with an explosive spell aimed at the ground, the rising dirt cloud hiding him from view.

Occluding my vision first, eh? Nanao thought as she cautiously lowered the tip of her sword to eye level, preparing for his strike.

“……?”

But no attack came. The dirt cloud faded, and once the air cleared, she saw Fay standing among a thicket of trees.

“This is what I mean. I’m a coward, you see, and I don’t intend to take you head-on.”

“…I see. Then it is a game of chase.”

Confirming her opponent’s style, Nanao lowered her sword to her side and ran forward.

Chela fended off Stacy’s fierce rush of attacks as Nanao chased after the cowardly Fay in order to get within striking distance. Elsewhere, the previous pair was embroiled in an altogether different battle.

“Flamma!”

“Frigus.”

Waves of heat and frigid air collided, jostling for less than a second before Albright’s blizzard pierced the flames and rushed forward. Oliver, however, was no longer at his original position. One of the basic rules of a spell duel was to never stay in one place for long, which was why he changed his position every time he cast a spell.

“Hah…!”

Focusing on his enemy ten yards away, he dashed forward without hesitation. On his third and sixth steps, he activated spatial magic, instantly changing the angle and friction of the ground beneath his feet. Lanoff-style sword arts, earth stance: Ghost Ground—combined properly with his running style, it was possible to move across the land at a trajectory that was impossible to predict.

“Clypeus.”

Albright cast a spell at his feet without a moment’s thought. A short wall about two feet tall rose up, blocking his opponent’s path.

Not bad, Oliver mused. Ghost Ground was most effective at the caster’s location. His only option to clear the difference in elevation was to leap, greatly reducing the shock-and-awe effect of his technique and forcing him to make a completely predictable move. And yet, stopping was exactly what his opponent wanted. Instantly, Oliver made a decision—if his only option was to leap, then he had to expand his options.

“Haaah!”

The moment he reached the wall, he imbued the ground beneath his feet with all the elasticity he could muster. Using it as a spring, he shot impossibly high into the air, spinning vertically in midair.

“Mm!”

Lanoff-style sword arts, sky stance: Windmill. It was a surprise attack that aimed to decapitate the opponent while passing overhead. Oliver’s body, high in the sky, disappeared completely from Albright’s view.

“Hmph!”

But Albright didn’t fall into the trap of looking up to try and regain his target; instead, he hunched down. Oliver’s blade swiped the air a

hairbreadth away from the nape of his neck. Gravity pulled Oliver back to the ground, and he landed behind him.

“Tonitrus!”

Albright quickly cast a lightning spell over his shoulder, aiming to catch his opponent in the back as he landed. Oliver calmly dodged to the left. When it came to dramatic moves like the Windmill, one’s recovery was often more important than the technique itself. The biggest prerequisite to using such a technique in a real battle was practicing until one was able to stick the landing and instantly take evasive maneuvers.

“Hmph, I see.”

Oliver once again took a midstance against his opponent. His sword still raised high, Albright snorted in boredom.

“Mediocre, as I thought. You might know a bunch of fancy tricks, but there’s no overwhelming decisiveness to your sword or spells. Do you really think you can cut me down with your street performance?”

“Save that for once you’ve managed to defeat me, Mr. Albright.”

As Oliver replied, he thought, He is certainly strong. But I’ve managed to lay the groundwork so far.

“Hrm!”

Albright stepped in, swinging his athame down, and Oliver struck back with the Lanoff-style advanced technique: Encounter. Circulating mana through his blade, he adjusted its arc the moment their swords passed each other, causing his opponent’s to barely miss.

And yet, his strike, which should have cleaved his opponent in two, was twisted by similar interference.

“—!”

“—Ha!”

Oliver quickly repositioned himself into the one-step, one-spell distance. Albright curled his lips into a mocking smirk.

“Distract your opponent with a variety of techniques and spells, then cut them down with Encounter in a head-on clash. That’s your winning formula, isn’t it?”

“……”

Oliver kept silent, but on the inside, he was beside himself. Albright had seen through him and matched his technique. Unlike that utter coincidence with Nanao, his opponent had read him completely this time. He’d never experienced anything like this since entering Kimberly and had never expected it from a student his own age.

“What a boring technique. Rossi was a nobody, too, but at least he had a unique sword style as his saving grace. But your swordplay has none of that. It is merely an extension of the Lanoff-school textbook.”

“……”

“It’s pitiable. How far can you even go on such a path? My guess is the best you’ll manage is to die early, just like everyone else mediocre in history. A death due to reaching above your place seems fitting—”

Oliver struck, not waiting for him to finish. Albright quickly moved to block, but high above him, lightning cracked. Lanoff-style sword arts, sky stance: Flash Wisp. The instantaneous flash blinded him, creating an opening.

"Please." Albright chuckled. He didn't even squint, let alone blink. His pupils quickly readjusted to the bright light, and his clear, unwavering vision revealed Oliver coming at him with a sweeping strike at his face. Calm as can be, Albright blocked it.

"Mm?!"

Albright felt himself being pushed back, sword and all. The unexpectedly heavy strike made it through Albright's defenses, and the tip of Oliver's sword scratched his cheek. This was the Lanoff-style advanced technique: Heavy Feather. By taking control of his body's center of gravity, Oliver was able to produce a strike that was much heavier than it appeared. The Flash Wisp had just been a diversion to allow for this, his true goal.

"The textbook just sliced your cheek open. Any thoughts, Mr. Albright?"

"You've got guts, you stupid nobody."

A terrible grin rose on Albright's face as soon as he felt blood dripping down his cheek. Oliver now realized, whether he wanted to or not, that their duel had only just begun.

"Oliver landed a hit!"

"Yes! Get that jerk!"

Guy, Pete, Katie, and the troll watched from afar as the three duels unfolded. The two boys were engrossed in the fighting, but Katie stared up at the vast ceiling.

"……"

"Hey, Katie, what's the matter?" asked Guy. "C'mon, at least root for him. Seems like he's up against someone really strong this time."

"…Right. But there's something about this place…"

She scanned around them, then soon turned back to Guy.

"Guy, mind lending me a hand? Just in case."

Fay Willock had decided long before the duel that he wouldn't compete using sword techniques. He utilized the trees as obstacles, refusing to get within striking range of his opponent. He put his all into maintaining distance while casting spells at her whenever an opening presented itself. It was a passive strategy, but it was the natural stance to take when facing someone who eclipsed him in the sword; wise, even. But not even a minute into their duel, it became all too obvious that what seemed wise on paper was anything but in the face of such incomparable skill.

"Whoa…!"

He dodged a swing by a hairbreadth—or so he thought, but she instantly swung again, this time at his neck. There wasn't even time to breathe. Nanao chased after him relentlessly, mowing down the trees in her way.

Unable to find a chance to counter, he soon found himself at his limit. His heel caught on a tree root, and he stumbled; Nanao immediately took

advantage of that moment. She swung, aiming to cleave his torso in two. Somehow, Fay managed to block it, his blade supported by his left hand.

“Gah…!”

He might have stopped the blade, but the force behind it remained unchanged. His body lifted into the air. Nanao drove through with her swing, launching him out of the forest.

“Ngh! Haah…!”

While Fay barely managed to stay upright as he landed, a strained smile surfaced on his lips. He wasn’t even succeeding at buying time. But how could he have predicted someone his own age could be so ridiculously powerful?

“What are you doing, Fay?!”

Stacy jumped back from her duel with Chela to assist her endangered partner. She thrust her sword at Nanao to prevent her from dealing the final blow, leaving Fay to deal with the threat of Chela charging at Stacy’s back. Through quick teamwork, they managed to return the battle to a staredown. The two of them stood back-to-back.

“Sorry. She was stronger than I expected.”

“Useless. At least last two minutes.”

Her words were sharp, but Stacy didn’t truly blame him. She’d known from the beginning that Nanao Hibiya was an opponent beyond compare, and that finishing off Chela by herself would be difficult. The battle so far had only proven her expectations true.

“I can’t keep her contained. We’ll never win like this,” said Fay.

“……”

This was where the battle truly began. With silent determination, the two shared a look.

“Fay, will you bring me victory?”

The quiet question rang in his ears. In that moment, a certain memory surfaced in his mind.

“A puppy, eh? Must have gotten lost, washed up here after losing his parents in a battle.”

His house, burned; his people, gone. He dragged his half-broken body along with no destination in mind. He sucked at the rain and dew to quench his parched throat and hunted wild animals to keep from starving. How many days had passed like this, with him just barely surviving?

Before he realized it, the end was staring him in the face. A human mage pointed a wand at the dying vermin, and he looked back up with exhaustion in his eyes. He no longer had the strength to move his limbs. Nor did he even have the will to resist.

“There’s no value in keeping a mongrel as a pet. I’ll end your suffering now.”

The mage declared his death in a gesture of selfish mercy. *Hurry up and do it, then*, he thought. He could bear the hunger and thirst. What he couldn’t bear was the cold solitude. He didn’t want to live one more second

in such a frigid world. Finally, the end was here. He started to close his eyes, when a figure stood in front of him.

“Wait, Father.”

Even though he’d fully resigned himself to his fate, he felt a sudden twinge of hesitation.

It was a human girl. She was less than ten years old, blond and innocent. And right then, she was standing between him and the mage’s wand.

“I was just thinking I could use a servant. I’ll take care of him.”

“Don’t be foolish. Go pick one from a suitable house, then.”

Bewilderment entered the mage’s voice.

The girl shook her head, then turned away.

“No, Father. I want this one.”

She got down on her knees and drew closer, fixing him with her bright-blue eyes. Then it all made sense. He didn’t even know her name, but deep in her eyes, he could see her heart. It was lonely, just like his. He lifted a withered arm and took hold of her hand—and from that moment on, the loneliness had ended.

“Do you need to ask? You’re my master, Stace.”

Fay Willock touched the choker around his neck as he spoke. Long ago, Stacy Cornwallis had extended him a hand, which he’d taken. And from the moment he’d nestled into her loneliness, he’d decided his path in life.

“Don’t hesitate. Just give me orders. As your guard dog, I’ll tear out your enemies’ throats!” His tone turned steely.

And with that last bit of encouragement, Stacy raised her athame above her head.

“Luna plena!”

She chanted the spell, and a ball of light rose straight into the air. Its blue-white glow was just like that of the moon. In the skyless labyrinth, a temporary night sky appeared.

“GAAAAAAAHHHHHH!”

“—?!”

A howl—almost a scream—rang out. Chela’s eyes went wide as dinner plates as Fay’s form changed. Bone and sinew rippled and expanded under his skin, tearing his shirt, while dense black fur sprouted all over his body. Sharp claws extended from his digits. Predatory fangs peered out from his protruding jaw. His skeletal structure itself morphed and expanded, until he towered over six feet tall.

“…Chela, what is that?” Nanao asked as she witnessed the transformation.

Chela answered with just two words:

“…A werewolf…!”

The two of them gulped audibly as Fay, now a black-furred wolf man, growled. Stacy jumped atop his back, grabbing a tuft of fur to secure herself. Most of her small body was hidden now, only her head and right arm appearing over his shoulder.

“…Go, Fay!”

“AWOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!”

The werewolf howled in response to his master’s order, then charged. Nanao shifted her stance, preparing to begin the battle anew, as Chela began chanting a spell.

“Zeyaaah!”

Meanwhile, Oliver was being forced into a tough defensive battle against a raging storm of blows.

“Kh…!”

Ever since Albright had started taking him seriously, the nature of his sword technique had completely changed. He was no longer playing around, waiting to see his opponent’s moves first. His every strike was filled with mana and made Oliver’s hands numb when he blocked, giving him zero chance to counter.

Oliver was in trouble. Realizing this, Albright boldly stepped in, closing the gap between them. Their swords rattled as they wrestled for superiority, both sides stopping dead in their tracks. Just then, Albright spotted out of the corner of his eye what was happening with the other duelists. Fay had transformed into a beast, and on his back sat a girl casting spells.

“Hmm? Her companion is part werewolf? Seems I didn’t give Cornwallis enough credit,” Albright muttered to himself, then returned his gaze to Oliver and sneered faintly. “Are you thinking about rushing to your allies’ aid? Go ahead. I know it’s an excuse to run away from me, but that’s no reason to be ashamed. This has always been a team battle, after all.”

It was an obvious taunt. Oliver quietly considered this from the other side of their clashing blades.

“…I can’t use that excuse.”

“Hmm?”

“Nanao and Chela don’t need help. The werewolf’s appearance is unexpected, but they’ll be fine. Nor do I have any good reason to turn my back on you.”

He focused more strength on his right hand, pushing his opponent away.

“I’ve learned something after exchanging blows with you, Mr. Albright. You aren’t nearly as confident as you sound.”

“……”

“Your words don’t impress me. That raw pride I felt from Mr. Andrews months ago—I don’t feel it in you. It’s strange. Even the way you call others ‘nobodies’ is formulaic and somewhat mechanical. I don’t know if this is the right way to express it, but…it’s as if you look down on me as a matter of duty. Am I wrong?”

“…Silence.”

Albright ended their conversation with a single word and resumed his furious assault. With no chance to counter against the overwhelming flurry, Oliver was once again forced into a defensive battle. Just as the balance of power began to dangerously favor one side…

“Frigus!”

…like a set play, Albright cast the spell as he struck. Oliver’s sword gave way a bit from the force of Albright’s athame and the ice spell cast from it. Subzero air cold enough to freeze even his skull flew at him in the form of a pure-white blizzard. Albright’s victory was assured—or so it seemed.

“Ice spells at an extremely close range. That’s your winning formula, isn’t it?”

“?!”

Albright’s eyes bulged at the sound of Oliver’s voice coming from within the blizzard—the moment he’d blocked, Oliver had grabbed his opponent’s wrist with his left hand, causing the spell to shoot slightly to the side. This allowed him to avoid a direct hit, and Albright’s duel-ending spell only froze his right ear.

“You aim for the moment I’m no longer on the offensive and force your spell into a close range where most mages would only use swords. It’s an extremely high-level, unorthodox technique. I can’t possibly copy it, but—”

Oliver gripped his opponent’s wrist harder as he analyzed his technique.

“—even someone as mediocre as me can lure you into attempting it.”

“You…!”

Albright instantly grabbed Oliver’s right wrist as well, locking them in one of the worst moves in all sword arts: the grapple.

“We’re now even closer than sword-striking distance, which all mages hate more than anything. How much do you know about this kind of fighting?” Oliver asked quietly.

Albright scowled spitefully. “…You think you’ve won just because you’re close to me, you nobody…?”

Oliver could see from his opponent’s eyes that Albright couldn’t ignore any further insults. Albright dropped his center of gravity low and roared:

“Don’t underestimate an Albright!”

We’ve fallen into a trap, Chela realized as she dodged the incoming claws and spells. Stacy was seated on the werewolf’s back, casting incantations while using his tough body as a shield. There was no doubt it was a powerful tactic in the moment. The werewolf was still quite nimble despite its passenger and its tough body allowed it to take several single-incantation spells without faltering. Neither magic nor sword could easily fight off this combo.

“Haaaaaaah!”

The Azian girl fought back against the threat head-on; her hair turned pure-white from the perfectly clear mana coursing through her body. Neither side retreated a step, and sparks flew as blade and claw clashed.

Fighting alongside her, Chela couldn’t help but feel a sense of self-condemnation. Normally, even a werewolf would stand no chance against Nanao. Her opponents were strong, certainly, but they were nothing compared with a garuda. It boggled the mind that Nanao was skilled

enough to have killed such a fearsome magical beast, yet Fay wasn't already dead. She'd landed many would-be lethal blows so far.

But each strike left nothing more than a scratch. Chela knew the reason for this absurdity—the dulling spells they'd cast on one another's blades before the duel. Cast at half efficacy, the spells limited the amount of lethal damage a sword could inflict. In this case, they were unable to deliver deep, instant-kill wounds. Of course, this didn't stop them from cutting flesh or drawing blood. Although they couldn't kill, they could still injure their opponent until they were unable to fight anymore—assuming they were up against a human, that is.

"AWROOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

But there was a loophole. The dulling spells on Chela's and Nanao's athames were based on Fay's human body. His transformation had altered his physical structure, dramatically increasing his regenerative abilities. As a result, blows that might leave a human grievously wounded were only scratches to Fay now.

"……!"

Realizing her failure, Chela bit her lip. She should have realized this before the battle began. In a typical on-campus, judged duel, this would have never been possible. The dulling spell would have been cast at full effect, and lethal blows would be left to the judge to decide. In fact, Fay wouldn't even be able to transform into a werewolf without prior permission. In his werewolf form, Fay couldn't hold an athame, let alone cast a spell. Even ignoring the dulling-spell issue, this was a clear violation of mage-duel etiquette.

However, they were in the labyrinth. Actions that might be considered illegal on school grounds were perfectly acceptable strategies down here, where no one could judge them. Even in this case, an older student would maintain that anyone who gets caught by such a ploy is a fool.

"Mmrgh…!"

Nanao attempted to sever Fay's hand with her blade, but it left just a shallow wound. At the same time, Stacy unleashed a lightning spell from his back, and Chela intervened with one of her own. The spells canceled each other out, sending sparks everywhere. The Azian girl jumped backward, narrowly escaping danger.

"What now, Michela? You seem to be struggling!" Stacy shouted victoriously, certain of their advantage. Her voice shook with excitement. No one but her knew just how long she'd waited to be in this position. "This is us! Whether I am part of the branch family or no, I'm not your replacement anymore! I'm going to beat you here and now and surpass you! Then Uncle will finally acknowledge me!"

The desire she'd been harboring in her heart for so long finally escaped her lips.

Chela's expression twisted with sorrow. "…You are truly amazing, Ms. Cornwallis."

Despite the situation, she complimented her. Stacy furrowed her brow suspiciously.

“That’s not sarcasm,” Chela insisted. “You two must have run through so many ideas in order to set up this situation. Using every advantage at your disposal in order to win… You have truly exceeded me with your earnest approach. I can only feel ashamed of my own arrogance and pride.”

Her words were filled with self-deprecation. But the next moment, Chela fixed Stacy with a look.

“And yet, I must ask you to dispel your partner’s transformation immediately, Ms. Cornwallis.”

Her expression was serious, and Stacy’s whole body stiffened.

Chela spoke not in anger or irritation, but out of pure concern for them. “…What are you—?”

“Don’t pretend not to know what I mean. This must be hardest on you, isn’t it?” Chela said gently, shaking her head, as she looked to the werewolf, Fay. “In modern magical society, werewolves aren’t allowed civil rights. And yet, the fact that you attend Kimberly as a student means that you aren’t a pure-blooded werewolf, Mr. Willock. You must be at least half-human… making you a half-werewolf.”

“……”

“Although mixed children do exist, humans and werewolves aren’t compatible on a genetic level. This creates many defects in a half-werewolf’s body. The most representative of these is the unbearable pain of transformation…”

Chela’s face twisted in pity. She knew all too well that the low growls escaping from between Fay’s fangs and the ear-rending bestial howls were not just battle cries. Even the excitement of combat couldn’t hide the equal amounts of pain. As his flesh and bones rearranged under the temporary moon, and as he moved his new body during their fight—even now, as he rapidly regenerated all his wounds—he was experiencing intense pain that was no different from torture. It was as if countless thorny vines were snaking their way through his insides.

“I hear that is why most half-werewolves never transform once during their entire lives. Mr. Willock is undoubtedly in unimaginable pain at this very moment. I suspect it might even drive him mad if he lets down his guard for even a second. How can you force your partner to go through such pain for a mere duel between first-years?!”

“ ”

Chela’s warning superseded any boundaries of enemy and ally. The emotions this unlocked within Stacy bubbled over, seizing hold of her and turning her vision white.

“Fay, why do you think Father never praises me?”

It was a scene she’d witnessed a thousand times before: her father and her siblings enjoying one another’s company. The girl observed them from a

distance, as if there were an invisible wall between them. She stood together with her attendant, unable to join in on the scene.

“The harder I work—the more I master what I’m taught—the more it seems to pain Father. No matter how hard I try, he never smiles…”

All she wanted was for her father to smile at her, to have him muss her hair like he did her siblings. And to that end, she worked hard. She trained more than all her siblings and regularly produced excellent results. But all it ever earned her was her father’s obvious attempts to hide some other emotion.

“Do I truly have to live as his child? Can I never measure up to his real children, no matter how much of a good girl I am? Will he…never love me?”

It took far too long for her to realize the truth. After years of fruitless efforts, her heart was left withered and starved. Not even her attendant could soothe her anymore.

“In that case, then one day, I have to find my real father, too.”

The boy nodded as she voiced her desire—and he swore to be by her side until the day she achieved it.

“What would you know…?” Stacy spat venomously.

She and Fay had walked together for as long as she could remember, wandering the endless frozen tundra for years with only each other to rely on for warmth. Everything they’d been through had brought them to this battle—only for their opponent to display such arrogance and call it a “mere duel between first-years.”

“You… You’ve always had it all. What would you understand about us?!” she screamed, as if to drive away the pain, and they attacked again in order to shut Chela up. All of a sudden, Chela stopped attacking, as if she’d lost the will to fight. She dodged Fay’s claws, and in the tiny opening that followed, Stacy unleashed a fire spell.

“Haaah!”

At the last moment, Nanao intervened, redirecting the flame to the side with her sword. She stood in front of the ringlet girl and said softly, “Yours is the wrong sort of concern, Chela.”

“…Huh?”

“I do not pretend to know either of your circumstances. However, there is one thing I understand: They have made up their minds to fight us. They are staking all they have on this duel.”

Chela swallowed. Nanao knew nothing about her opponents’ backgrounds, and yet she’d sensed from the very beginning that this was a fight they couldn’t afford to lose.

“I’m sure you know of pain and suffering all too well, Chela. Thus, if our opponents have made their decision, then it would be rude of us to refuse to meet them at full strength. Am I wrong?”

Her words pierced deeper than the sternest lecture. Her eyes opened, Chela answered resolutely:

“No, you’re not. You’re absolutely correct, Nanao.”

She felt terribly ashamed of her attitude. Just now, she'd pitied their opponents when they didn't ask for it, even demanding they surrender for fear of their suffering. Who did she think she was?

"I apologize for my comment, Ms. Cornwallis. I won't ask you to dispel his transformation again."

She admitted to her insolence, but her sympathy and kindness remained. One could call her arrogant, but there were some things one just couldn't compromise on. Chela held tightly to this belief as she continued:

"In exchange, I promise you that your pain will not last much longer."

"—! Damn youuuuuu!"

Fay howled as if in response to Stacy's erupting anger.

Chela readied her athame, poised to receive them head-on. Nanao took her place beside her friend, a smile on her face.

Three minutes had passed since Oliver and Albright began grappling, yet neither side seemed ready to give in.

"……"

"Gh…!"

From the outside, it appeared as if neither of them were making any large moves. And yet, the duelists' expressions were more focused than ever. The push and pull of their arms, the shuffling of their feet, and the casting of spatial magic—this battle to knock the other off balance raged on, with both parties using every tool at their disposal.

A grapple between mages was all about who could disrupt their opponent's balance, freeing their dominant, sword-wielding hand. Thus, they employed close-quarters combat techniques and readjusted their centers of gravity, all the while throwing spatial magic into the mix.

"Haah!"

Albright feinted, then attempted a throw. Instantly, Oliver cast Gravestone at his feet. His movement blocked, Albright nearly lost balance himself.

"Tch…!"

"Hah!"

Albright clicked his tongue loudly.

With neither able to attain dominance, they returned to a stalemate once again. Oliver's opponent spat irritably.

"…You filth. Go back to the swamp you crawled out from! How long do you intend on continuing this farce?"

"For all your complaining, you certainly have no qualms getting down in the mud with me."

They hurled snide comments at each other in their deadlock.

"I don't even compare to you when it comes to pure fighting instinct," Oliver continued. "But I have confidence in my persistence. I'll drag you to the bottom of the swamp with me!"

As the battle continued, Stacy became convinced their plan was perfect. The dulling spell sealed the samurai's blade, and making full use of the

werewolf form's physical toughness meant the scales were tipped entirely in their favor. As long as their opponents couldn't injure Fay, they were forced to aim for Stacy, who was riding on his back. Fay, however, was quite nimble, and Stacy wasn't recklessly cocky. Striking her would be nigh impossible for any opponent.

"Let's finish this, Fay!"

"AWROOOOOOOOO!"

Their opponents were out of options. Realizing this, Stacy spurred on her partner in order to end the duel for good. They charged between Chela and Nanao, separating them. Then Fay immediately spun around.

"Now!"

Before their opponents could attempt to regroup, they charged ferociously toward Chela. This meant leaving their backs vulnerable to Nanao, but it was no secret that she wasn't able to use spells in battle just yet. It was impossible for her to attack from this range. And no matter how skilled Chela might be, there was no way she could handle their coordinated assault on her own.

"This is the end, Michela!" Stacy shouted, pointing her athame over Fay's shoulder. Chela silently swung her sword, eyes fixed on the oncoming werewolf.

"Tonitrus!"

She cast a lightning spell. Its strength was impressive, but it wasn't enough to threaten Stacy. She firmly believed that Fay's bulky body would easily block it and readied her athame, focused only on offense.

"…Guh?!"

"AWROO?!"

An unexpected shock ran through her whole body. Her limbs went numb. She tried to grab on to Fay's shoulder, but her fingers wouldn't move. Helplessly, Stacy fell to the ground. Sensing this, Fay quickly stopped and turned around.

"Apologies, but you won't be picking her back up."

The Azian girl stood solemnly between him and his master. His eyes began to fill with panic, and he forgot even the terrible pain he was in.

"…Rrf! Graaaaaah!"

The only way through was to crush the samurai girl. Fay launched himself at her, fangs and claws bared, but the girl blocked his every attack. As long as she continued to stand there, he wouldn't be able to advance even a step.

Chela entrusted Fay to Nanao and cast her gaze to their other opponent, Stacy, who had managed to stand up.

"…I changed the property of my spell. Before, I was focusing on piercing. This time, I focused on conduction—in other words, an electrical current that runs across the whole body's surface. Hardly damaging to a werewolf, but as you were in contact with him, there was no way for you to avoid receiving a shock."

“—!”

“If you’d paid attention, you would have noticed the difference. You could have even canceled it out. But you were too focused on ending the fight before it was over.”

“Sh…sh…shut uuuup!” the girl shouted as if to shake it all off. It was unavoidable now—she had to defeat Chela with her own strength. There was no path forward now that she couldn’t resume her tag-team strategy with Fay. She buried her despair in rage, then got back into the Rizett style’s lightning stance.

“Good. Come.”

Chela took the same stance, as if accepting her intentions. Stacy struck first with a thrust, and the duel between fellow Rizett students resumed.

“Ngh! Mmf! Hah…!”

But Chela calmly parried every attack, steadily advancing. Panic crept into Stacy’s eyes as she witnessed the ringlet girl’s unshakable procession.

“Now that you’re alone, your technique has gotten sloppy. I can understand how you feel, but you lack mental training, Stacy!”

A tiny opening appeared in their battle, and Chela shrewdly picked up on it. She thrust her sword, intending to end the fight.

“Hah!”

Albright attempted another throw, when suddenly, he fell off balance.

“Guh?!”

The Grave Soil cast beneath him swallowed up the leg he’d used to pivot. This was Oliver’s counter. Albright instantly pulled back his leg, returning to a stalemate yet again.

“Hah…!”

“……”

Unlike nonmagicals, a mage’s strength was determined not by their muscles, but the mana flowing through their body. In this respect, Albright clearly dominated. This was due entirely to his advantage in physical training, and it wasn’t far-fetched to say that a difference in mana output directly translated to a difference in strength. Thus, in a contest of pure strength, Oliver stood no chance, and this disadvantage wasn’t minimized at all by grappling.

And yet, Albright couldn’t knock Oliver off his feet. This was proof that Oliver must have surpassed him in some element other than strength—for example, technique.

“……!”

It was a hard pill to swallow, but Albright remembered a saying: “To leap higher than anyone, you must first be the most grounded of anyone.” It was a famous quote passed down in the Lanoff style. Put simply, it meant: Focus on your earth stance.

As long as one fought on the ground, Grave Soil and Gravestone were useful in many situations. So instead of memorizing many complicated

moves with niche uses, it was far more practical to master these two spells in order to respond to a variety of situations.

Oliver's fighting style was based on this concept. Giving himself advantageous footing and giving his opponents disadvantageous footing—this was all there was to it. But there was a fearsome amount of depth to this technique.

Albright was forced to rescind his earlier conviction that Oliver was a master of cheap tricks. The number of one's techniques did not speak to their true nature. What was truly terrifying about an opponent like this was his deep understanding of his own techniques. Oliver had dedicated himself with unthinkable precision for his age to training in the unpretentious basics.

"Guh…"

For the first time, unrest began to rise in Albright's heart. A normal mage wouldn't want to go on like this. In fact, it was natural to want to quickly return to their original distance. His opponent, however, was purposefully getting far too close, as if to say a battle of attrition in the mud was exactly what he wanted.

And amid this endless battle of wills, a chill ran up Albright's spine. It was unthinkable, of course, but if this dragged out even further, with both sides chipping away at each other's focus…would he be the first to make a mistake?

"…Ohhh!"

The thought forced to him to act. He feinted pushing forward with both hands, then pulled his whole body back in the opposite direction as hard as he could. This created an incline to brace against, so he dug in deeper to stabilize and then ripped off the restraint around his right wrist. At the same time, he shoved his left hand forward, which was gripping Oliver's wrist. His opponent became unbalanced, and his robe sleeve fluttered before Albright's eyes.

Albright had bet the duel on this plan, and it succeeded. Both sides jumped back. Just as Albright was feeling relief, a shock pierced his solar plexus.

"Guh?!"

Something had hit him hard in the stomach. The next moment, upon realizing what it was, Albright's eyes went wide; it was a leg. His mind flashed back to that fluttering robe sleeve the moment they'd separated. Using this as a distraction, his opponent had hit him in the solar plexus with a kick in that brief moment of disengagement.

Albright realized his mistake. This had been Oliver's intention all along. When Albright pulled back his right hand in order to free it, he'd extended his left to unbalance his opponent. This created a directional momentum as they separated, which Oliver had used to power his roundhouse kick.

Melee techniques were very rare among the three basic styles. That didn't mean they were nonexistent, however. This was one of them: the

Lanoff-style kick technique: Hidden Tail. It was a kick that blocked an opponent's view with a robe or cape, then struck at the solar plexus.

"Fr—i—!"

The distance between them opened up immediately. Albright held his athame aloft and started to cast a spell—and found he couldn't. He couldn't breathe. The all-important incantation wouldn't leave his mouth.

He hadn't just been kicked in the stomach. A strike to the solar plexus affected the diaphragm, right under one's lungs. The contraction of this organ was what allowed the body to breathe. By delivering a heavy blow to this area, even a mage would inevitably find their breathing impaired.

"Impetus!"

The wind howled. Following up on his roundhouse kick, Oliver smoothly cast a spell to end the duel. Albright, knocked off balance from the kick and unable to cast magic, could do nothing to stop it. He put up his arms to protect his head, but as if predicting this, the powerful gale slammed into his winded torso. He coughed up blood, staining the ground red, and toppled backward.

"Seems you couldn't handle the mud for long. I win, Mr. Albright," Oliver announced matter-of-factly as he gazed down at his opponent from a midstance.

Albright continued to stare up at the ceiling, as if Oliver were speaking some foreign language.

The sword that fell from her hands signaled the end of the long duel.

"…Why…?"

Stacy fell to her knees, staring at her wrist, which was bleeding from a deep gash. She sat lifelessly, like a puppet with its strings cut.

"…Why?" she muttered, voice shaking. "Why can't I win?!"

Tears overflowed from her eyes and dripped to the ground. The moment he saw this, the will to fight vanished from Fay's eyes.

"Aw…roo…"

His limbs dangled weakly, but Nanao didn't capitalize on the opening in his defenses. His body rapidly shrank before her eyes. In a few seconds, he was back to his human form. Ignoring the blood streaming from the cuts all over his body, Fay stumbled over to the crying girl.

"……Calm…down… We were weaker. That's all."

He kneeled next to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

Chela watched over them in silence.

Eventually, Fay looked at her. "You win. I'm sorry we couldn't put up more of a fight, Ms. McFarlane."

Chela shook her head. "The tears one sheds in defeat are a precious thing. There's nothing to feel sorry about. Just tell me one thing: Have you two always hated me?"

It was a terribly lonely question.

Fay took a minute to choose his words. "You did nothing wrong. You were just…too bright for her." He looked at the sobbing girl and spoke

softly. “The Cornwallises are one of many houses derived from the McFarlanes. Back when they split off, their history was hardly shallow. But by now, the greatest meaning to their existence comes from their severance from the main house. Children of the branch families exist to become your replacement if the need should ever arise.”

“…Yes, I’m aware.”

Chela nodded bitterly. It wasn’t an uncommon thing at all. The pursuit of magic meant the constant danger of death was always close by, and so there were always accidents or incidents that could cause a family to splinter. In preparation for these circumstances, branch families were created. Even if one family was destroyed, relatives from the same bloodline could take up the torch in their stead.

“But it’s a little different for her. Her name is Cornwallis, but she has a direct genetic connection to the McFarlane family. And that’s because… she’s Theodore McFarlane’s daughter, just like you.”

Nanao cocked her head quizzically at this. “Her father is Lord McFarlane? Hold on a second, please. Does that make her your sister, Chela?”

“Biologically speaking, yes. But due to magical family customs, I’m not permitted to call her as such. Similarly, my father cannot call her his daughter.”

Chela’s tone was incredibly stiff. One could sense the weight of her birth into a famous magical family.

“Those of outstanding stock have a duty to multiply and keep the line strong. It may be difficult for a new mage like yourself to understand, but older magical houses are guided by such principles. One example of this is the practice of ‘sharing’ that noble blood with branch families. Thus, my father bore a child with Lady Cornwallis.”

A love for bloodlines and a callous disregard for the workings of the human heart—this kind of situation was part and parcel of the mages’ world. The cruelty made Fay grit his teeth.

“As your replacement, she’s done really well,” he said. “She might not measure up to you, but that says more about you than it does her. You won’t find that she’s lacking in any way. But that’s the problem: The talent she inherited from the main family was too prevalent. As a mage, she totally surpassed all the Cornwallis children.”

“…!”

“You see where this is going, don’t you? Every time she displayed her talent, the look in her adoptive father’s eyes changed. The results she produced continued to prove that Theodore McFarlane’s blood was superior. But until she was ten years old, Stacy had no idea. Thus, she was convinced her father’s ire was because she wasn’t working hard enough. As a result…all the work she put into trying to earn his love only earned his scorn.”

Chela stood there aghast.

Bitterness and regret colored Fay's visage. "What she wanted was for her hard work to be rewarded. To display more talent than you and be accepted by her real father as your replacement."

"I…"

"I know. It was basically impossible. Even if she beat you, that dream would have never come true. But she had no other dreams to chase. It was obviously a foolish goal, but chasing became her whole life…"

Fay balled his fists and stared at the ground. Stacy continued to bawl her eyes out.

Nanao bent down and peered at her face.

"……"

"*Hic*… Wh-what…?" Stacy croaked, noticing the attention on her.

The Azian girl stated quite plainly, "I don't see it."

"Huh?"

"I don't see the resemblance at all. It is absolutely impossible for you to become Chela's replacement."

"Bwuh?!" Stacy was taken aback by the brutal comment.

Chela looked at her friend with bewilderment.

"N-Nanao…?"

"I couldn't accept it, either. If Chela died tomorrow, would I have to treat you as her replacement for the rest of eternity? Nay, I couldn't do it. Even if you happened to exceed her in magical ability, it just wouldn't be possible."

Nanao held nothing back, powered by her lack of background as well as their shared values as mages.

"People are not tools. You cannot simply replace one with another. Chela, you, me—we were all born as ourselves and are ourselves."

Stacy sat on the ground in a daze, unable to understand more than half of what the Azian girl was saying. But one thing was clear: The girl before her was speaking to her in earnest.

"And so I wish to get to know you. You and no one else. Not Chela's replacement, but the proud swordswoman who faced her in battle head-on. Is that not enough?"

Oliver smiled slightly as he listened to Nanao speak from afar.

"…They're all blown away. People always get like that when Nanao starts talking," he muttered, then looked over at Albright as he lay on the floor. "If you give me one of your medallions, you should still have some left. If you survive till tomorrow, the last day of this tournament, then you'll get a chance to fight her, too. I'm sure you'll learn plenty."

There was no response. Albright should have recovered enough to move again, but he simply stared into empty space. Eventually, however, he reached into his robe pocket, took out a medallion, and tossed it at Oliver. He shakily stood up, then turned around and started walking away.

"…? Wait, Mr. Albright—that way leads deeper into the labyrinth."

He ignored Oliver's warning and kept going. Oliver wondered if he should stop him by force but, in the end, decided against it. He understood the urge to be alone. Albright also seemed used to the depths of the labyrinth, so perhaps stopping him would prove to be needless meddling.

"Respondeo."

But Oliver turned out to be wrong. Albright muttered a sinister-sounding incantation. The space about them changed. A low, almost shivering sound filled the vast room. The moment Oliver recognized it, he scanned their surroundings.

"This is—"

"Guys, come here!" Katie shouted from behind him, terrified. At the same time, the sound became clear: wingbeats. The unsettling noise was just like the buzz of a large insect flying by. However, there were no insects around. In other words…

"It's a warning call…!" Katie yelled. "I wasn't sure at first, but it has to be! Everyone, look up! This isn't just any open space—it's one huge stinger-bee colony!"

Everyone except Albright looked straight up, then simultaneously recoiled in shock. What they saw was a swarm of bees, each as big as a human, emerging from every crevice in the ceiling and descending upon them.

"Guh…!"

"Hurry! Run over here!"

Snapping back to reality, Oliver spun and took off. Katie was waving him over, and tree branches extended from the ground underneath her feet, creating a temporary evacuation zone. She'd lit some incense in the middle.

As Oliver slipped through the branches, the unique smell stung at his nose. Nanao and Chela were close behind.

"*Huff! Huff!* Katie, what…?!"

"I lit some anti-insect incense! It should give us a few minutes!"

"And I created a barricade out of some seeds I had on me. It won't last long against this army, though!" Guy shouted as new branches continued to sprout thanks to a growth enhancing spell. Just then, Fay also came running, dragging Stacy by the hand.

"Sorry, but please let us in! I know you don't owe us help, but—"

"Just get in! Now's not the time for that stuff!" Pete yelled, yanking them inside the barricade. Over a hundred stinger bees surrounded them, enough to bury them. Oliver spotted his previous opponent riding on the back of an extra-large one.

"What's the meaning of this, Mr. Albright?!" he demanded.

Albright paused, then swung his athame. "…Long ago, my family's servants were nonmagicals."

His low voice echoed from above. He seemed to be employing an amplification spell, as the buzzing didn't drown out his voice. Oliver glared at him as he continued.

“Their only daughter was a girl my age. Her duties were to see to my needs and be my conversation partner. I’d received strict training ever since I was young, and so she became one of my few trusted companions.

“At some point, I started playing chess with her. Of all the games we played, this was the one we both enjoyed the most. I always won—but no matter how many times she lost, she never shrank from my challenge. She asked the adults for pointers and slowly improved.”

Unlike before, there was no animosity in his detached tone. It was just incredibly dry. His thick shell of pride and arrogance was broken, and now his withered heart was being exposed.

“Then one day, I lost to her for the first time. My established tactic and her ploy meshed perfectly, handing me a refreshingly complete defeat. She jumped for joy on the bed, and I was happy for her. It was unfortunate to lose, but I’d never seen someone’s hard work bear fruit before. But that happiness proved to be fatal.”

His gaze darkened with self-condemnation and regret. Oliver recognized this look; he saw it whenever he looked in the mirror. It was the look of someone who’d made a mistake they could never take back.

“The excitement carried through to the next day, and so I told my parents at breakfast that morning: The servant girl had beaten me at chess. She’d employed a brilliant strategy, and it was the most entertaining game we’d had. They responded by immediately casting the pain curse on me three times. I screamed and cried my eyes out.”

“……!”

“I was beaten for half a day. In a windowless, underground room, they carved the Albright attitude deep into my heart with unforgettable pain and fear. Once evening came, I was finally freed, and I stumbled back to my room. All I wanted to do was talk to that girl again. I was sure that if we could chat carefreely like we always did, my heart would once more be at ease. But she never came back to my room. While I was being disciplined, her whole family had been executed.”

Chela bit her lip. She could understand the impossible weight placed upon this boy’s shoulders by being born to a militant family of magical society, and the various senseless cruelties that brought with it.

“It was then I learned: I am not allowed to lose to anyone. My victories and losses are not my own. They belong to the Albrights. I do not have the right to lose, nor the freedom to respect those who beat me.”

Oliver realized just how accurate his intuition had been. Achieving victory and arrogantly calling others nobodies were all part of his duty. He was not allowed to live any other way. It was impossible for him to even imagine any other way. His existence was bound by the Albright name and the duty of his blood. This was what mages had done to them.

“It was an excellent duel, Oliver Horn. I lost, beyond a shadow of a doubt. But I am an Albright. Thus, I must erase that result. Throw down your arms and surrender now. I won’t hurt you. I’ll cast an amnesia spell on

you all, and with your memories of the past few hours gone, I'll let you leave. But…if you resist, I'll have to let these creatures attack you."

His tone was too flat for such a threatening statement. Katie was furious.

"How can you be so selfish? Is this really how you're going to eliminate your loss?!"

"Go to hell! Come down here, you bastard!"

Guy shouted with her.

Albright accepted their anger without resistance and looked at Oliver with empty eyes.

"…You said I looked down on others as a duty, Oliver Horn."

"……"

"Well, you're correct. And I will continue to do so long into the future. No matter who beats or admonishes me, I will erase it all… And nothing will change. The nobodies around me will always be beneath me."

Announcing his destiny, he shifted his gaze to the girl behind Oliver, her face a mess from crying.

"Ironic, isn't it, Cornwallis? I'm jealous of you. At least you cry after a loss."

Suddenly, the bees that had been hovering in the low airspace swarmed around Albright until he was no longer visible from the ground. As the other bees continued to buzz about the barricade, Chela shot her friends a grim look.

"The incense will only last a few more minutes! Our situation is dire—Oliver, any ideas?!"

Everyone focused their eyes on him. After a few seconds of silence, he balled his hands into fists and looked at the ground.

"…I hate to say it, but surrendering is an option. I don't think Albright intends to take anything but our medallions. This swarm of stinger bees is too much for us. If we all want to make it out of here safely, it's the best choice." His voice was quiet and hoarse.

Chela nodded in agreement, then looked at the Azian girl.

"…Nanao, what do you think?"

Everyone watched Nanao, who was continuing to stare up at the ceiling, keeping sight of the enemy beyond the bees.

"If that is Oliver's decision, then I have no objections. But if you'll allow me, I'd like to hand that boy defeat."

Her voice was firm. Her choice of words was specific, too. Not *I'd like to try* or *I don't want to lose*, but *I'd like to hand that boy defeat*.

"It is a warrior's life to think only of victory. However, on this path, defeat is an irreplaceable treasure. Accepting defeat and respecting the victor is how people progress. But this boy doesn't do this. He never errs, never grows—just stagnates in the same prison, clinging to his immature heart. I pity him immensely."

Silence fell. Nanao's expression was one of neither rage nor irritation.

“…I’m fine with it,” Katie eventually muttered. She clenched her fists, trying to keep from shivering. “I don’t want you, Oliver, or Chela to surrender to that jerk. We aren’t fresh-faced new students anymore. I’m prepared to fight against unreasonable odds, too.”

She refused to accept always being protected. That’s what she’d sworn to herself when she proposed the shared workshop within the labyrinth. Inspired by her determination, Guy snorted.

“I agree. Katie just stole my thunder.”

“Guy…” Oliver shot a conflicted look at Guy, who simply grinned.

“There’s a way to win, isn’t there? That’s what I sensed from you earlier. So if you’re waving the white flag ’cause you’re concerned for us, I’d ask you to reconsider.”

In Guy’s eyes, Oliver wouldn’t have said “surrendering is an option” if there really was no chance at victory. He was right, but Oliver shook his head sternly.

“…I’m grateful you feel that way, but I can’t—I can’t get you all involved in such a risky gamble. If it fails, there’s no telling what—”

Oliver urged caution once again, but someone grabbed his sleeve.

“…Hey. Quit acting like you’re our guardian.”

“Huh?”

Oliver’s gaze was met with a bespectacled one. Pete was the most powerless of them all, but he was also the most determined.

“Don’t you get it yet? Me, Guy, and Katie didn’t come this far just to get in your way!”

Those words pierced Oliver’s heart, and he frowned bitterly.

“…You’re right. Sorry, Pete. You’re absolutely right.”

He admonished himself for his actions. Who was he to draw the line between the protectors and the protected? His friends had made it this far with him; did he have no respect for their feelings? This wasn’t their first day at Kimberly. They knew the infamy of the academy and the risks of descending into the labyrinth, and they’d accepted them. That was why they were here now. So if they knew the danger and still wished to fight, then…

“Let me explain the plan. Huddle up, everyone. You two as well.”

There was no reason to resist. After inviting Stacy and Fay in, too, Oliver began detailing their escape plan. Under the looming pressure of the bee swarm, he finished in thirty seconds.

“…Pretty bold strategy you got there. But I like it. I’m in,” Guy said.

“Me too,” Katie agreed. “The mixture has to be accurate, so leave that to me!”

They spoke bravely, and the others all indicated they accepted the plan, too. Once everyone was in agreement, Chela spoke up.

“…May I say something, Oliver?”

“Of course. If you have grievances, let me hear them now.”

Oliver nodded and turned to her. He couldn’t disregard her input on a magical battle. But she just shook her head lightly.

“I have no grievances. Only a suggestion, one that may increase our chances of victory. I’ve been keeping a little something to myself—but now I’m going to let it out.”

And with that, she began softly explaining her plan. Everyone’s eyes went wide with shock as they heard what she was suggesting.

Albright awaited their decision from above, surrounded by the swarm of bees.

“……It’s about time,” he muttered to himself.

Below him, the smoke from the anti-insect incense was thinning. Once it was gone, their only defense left would be the magically grown tree barricade, which would prove no more effective than a sheet of paper against a swarm of stinger bees.

“Mm?!”

But what happened next, he hadn’t expected. As the incense died out, a new column of smoke appeared from within the barricade. At first, Albright assumed the incense still had some kick left, but that wasn’t it. The purpose of this smoke was the exact opposite. The bees rushed recklessly toward the barricade, incited.

“Impossible—they mean to draw the bees *to* them? That’s suicide!”

“Oliver, we ready?! The barricade’s not gonna hold!”

“Not yet! We’ve got to draw in as many as we can!”

Bits of chewed wood rained down upon them, and Guy’s voice was tinged with panic. Oliver tried to reassure him. Attracting the bees to them was a foolish notion, but there was no backing out now.

“Haaaah…”

Everyone was at their positions except for Chela, who was standing in the center and focusing on her breathing. She adjusted the mana circulation within her body, unlocking the reserves within her womb. She repeated the process she’d shown Pete, and when she was finished—she began a transformation unlike what Pete had experienced.

“Ch-Chela…!”

“Whoaaa!”

Katie and Guy stared, forgetting the danger they were in. Mana began to overflow before their very eyes. Although the output greatly outpaced Pete’s, the base function was the same. However, in accordance with the increased flow of mana within her, her body was undergoing a certain, definite transformation.

Specifically, her ears. Her friends watched as her round, sleek ears grew long and pointed. It was clearly a physical trait no human possessed, and what it meant was obvious to everyone except Nanao.

“…Don’t be surprised. I’m sure most of you are familiar with the source of this,” Chela said gently.

And she was right. Ever since their first meeting, Oliver had known. That dark skin and sparkling golden hair—no human in the entire Union could possess such a combination of traits.

Rumor had it—although, it was more like an open secret—that the current Lord McFarlane had taken an elven wife.

It was extremely rare for elves, who valued the purity of their race above all, to bear a human child. As such, an elf's human offspring boasted an exceptionally high aptitude for magic and could master almost any element. So if someone was able to acquire such abilities—by any means necessary—then it held great implications for human mages.

“This is the first time I’ve shown this to humans outside my family. I’m a bit embarrassed, as you might imagine.”

She smiled to hide her bashfulness, then signaled with her eyes to Oliver that she was ready.

“It’s time!” he said. “Everyone, raise your athames! Chela, your incantation will be the signal!”

“Understood.”

Eight swords rose into the air, pointed at the top of the barricade, which had been nearly destroyed by the attacking bees.

“Magnus—”

Chela began the incantation. Sensing a titanic flow of power around them, the others swallowed.

“—tonitrus!”

“”””””Tonitrus!”””””””

Their visions were seared white. Unable to even see his opponent, Oliver bundled the seven human-powered spells together and sent them flying after the great thunderbolt.

Just as the barricade was about to collapse, a blinding bolt of lightning surged up from within. Albright stared, mouth agape, as it enveloped over half of the bee swarm.

“Wha—?!”

Burned to a crisp, the bees fell to the ground. Getting them to cluster atop the barricade had been a trap, causing over 70 percent of the swarm to be caught in the lightning strike. Albright realized the incense was an opening move to set this up, so what really surprised him was something else.

“A double incantation…?! Unbelievable! That’s not possible for first-years!”

His shock was understandable. Normally, first-years *weren’t* able to use double incantations. They magnified the effects of a spell but also took a huge toll on the user’s body if they were too young. Forcing past that limit would result in the spell fizzling out, or at worst, exploding in the caster’s face and injuring them. It wouldn’t be until the latter half of their second year that their bodies would be able to withstand the strain—at least, that was the widely accepted theory.

But this was the case only for humans. Naturally, it didn’t apply to elves.

“Have at thee!”

There was no time to gawk. While the swarm of bees was in chaos, a single figure shot out of the half-destroyed barricade. Albright tightened his lips. An Azian girl riding a broomstick was flying straight toward him.

“B-bees! Strike her down!”

She was closing the distance fast. In order to break her momentum, Albright ordered his surviving familiars to attack. The nearby bees quickly

charged her, but their jaws and stingers met only empty air. Nanao maneuvered easily through their ranks, leaving them in the dust.

“You dodged them all?!”

“HAAAAAAAAAAH!”

With the bees behind her, there was no one to stop Nanao. Albright had no time to prepare a spell—the bee he was sitting on split in two, cut at the torso.

“Kh… Elletardus!”

His ride gone, he was flung into the air. He slowed his fall with a spell and landed, then quickly raised his sword into position. Hot on his tail, the samurai girl came rocketing down to him. She jumped off her broomstick, landed, and glared at him.

“You finally deign to stand on the same plane as me.”

“……”

“I have come to defeat you. Now draw your sword.”

Nanao brought her blade in front of her eyes and beckoned him to do the same. Albright looked to the sky on the off chance any of his bees had survived—but she stopped him with a terse command.

“Look forward, not up! There is no one on this battlefield but you and I!”

“…!”

“Only we shall decide victory! No one else shall steal it! Not family rules nor even the gods themselves!”

She spoke confidently; no one would be able to interfere. Only two opponents stood on this battlefield—nothing else. Her eyes were that of a warrior, clear and pure. Bathed in their light, something within Albright broke. The chains that had long bound him clattered as they fell from his heart.

“…Ha—ha-ha!”

A strange laugh escaped him. Unconsciously taking a stance, he wondered—how long had it been since he’d experienced such cheer? The answer came to him immediately. *Ah, that’s right. This is what it always felt like, playing chess with her.*

“Have at you, samurai!”

“Yah!”

They roared and dashed forward into the one-step, one-spell distance governed by sword arts and strategy. Their mana-infused blades clashed, sending sparks everywhere.

“OHHHHHHHHH!”

“HAAAAAAAH!”

The sounds of their raging battle echoed. It was terrifyingly fierce, yet also joyous. They exchanged eight blows, neither retreating a step. One athame clattered to the ground.

“’Twas an excellent battle.”

Having delivered the final blow, Nanao stood with her sword still drawn and spoke one last time. The pain of her diagonal swipe still fresh in his mind, Albright nodded. It was a somewhat pleasant feeling.

"—Yeah."

The strength slipped from his body, and he fell on his back.

"Now I can finally experience it—an excellent loss."

He closed his eyes, his heart fulfilled. In his mind's eye, a chessboard appeared. And on the other side, a familiar girl was smiling at him.

With the mage duels decided, the surviving bees returned to their hives, and the vast room was finally at peace.

"Looks like we made it. Man, was I sweating!"

"I was so scared! Nanao, thank you! You did so well."

Guy heaved a sigh of relief and sat down next to the troll as Katie welcomed Nanao back with an embrace.

Chela staggered from exhaustion. "That was…quite strenuous. Even if I knew it would be."

"Hey, you okay?!"

Pete dashed over and caught her by the shoulder. As her friends jogged over in concern, she smiled lightly to reassure them.

"Yes, don't worry. I've already tested whether I could perform a double incantation while in this state. The sudden surge of mana has simply left my body in a bit of shock."

Stacy studied her. "You…held back?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"I mean, you did, didn't you? You used that spell in our duel as well. I was so surprised that you could manage a double incantation… If you'd attacked with that from the start, we would have been powerless."

She sulked and turned away.

Chela smiled awkwardly. "I suppose I can't stop you from thinking that, but I never intended to use *this* in a duel between first-years. There is nothing to gain from winning battles by relying on an innate ability."

"…We're related, and yet I had no idea you were a morphling half-elf," Stacy muttered, somewhat forlorn.

There were many different types of elf and human mixes, also known as half-elves: the actualized, who inherited many of the unique traits of elves; the dormant, who were indistinguishable from humans; and the morphlings, who displayed unique traits from both sides depending on the situation.

"I'd also hoped our battle could go on as long as possible," Chela added. "That was our first real exchange since we were twelve."

"…Huh…?"

Stacy's eyebrows shot up.

Chela looked into her eyes as she began reminiscing. "I was always so excited for our yearly visit. You were so good at making the flowers bloom with magic, and we both had such fun. Do you remember making this?"

She took something out of her pocket: a small, old flower crown. It hadn't been weaved from plucked flowers but instead grown into that shape from seeds with magic.

Stacy stared, her mouth agape. "Y-you still have that? And you even went to the trouble to preserve it…?"

"It's my memento of those times. Of course I wouldn't lose it."

Stacy stiffened, and Chela hugged the crown to her heart.

"I may not be able to call you my sister, but you are my family despite the distance of our houses. It filled me with joy to see how you grew between each of our rare visits. And so as to not embarrass you, I wanted to show you my growth as well."

"_____"

"But that ended up hurting you. I'm sorry for not noticing—for never understanding your pain."

As she apologized, she wrapped her hands around Stacy's right hand. The gesture was full of unspoken feelings, and she made sure they would not miss each other this time.

"Just let me say this: I have never thought of you as my replacement."

She stared into her half sister's eyes as she spoke, and great tears began to fall from Stacy's.

"Waaaah…!"

Stacy started crying again, and Chela gently embraced her.

Oliver and Albright watched them from a distance.

"…You all won't be satisfied with just taking a medallion, will you?"

"You caught me. True."

Albright was seated on the ground, and next to him, Oliver grinned wryly. He had no particular business with the boy, but now that the duel with Nanao was over with, he felt the urge to say something.

"…Let's duel again, when we're stronger than today," Oliver muttered.

Albright grinned. "Ha-ha! Be careful what you wish for. I'll definitely come back stronger than ever after tasting defeat."

"I'm getting chills just imagining it. But I can assure you, I'll be stronger, too," Oliver stubbornly replied. Two years later, maybe three—it wasn't difficult to imagine Albright becoming unbelievably powerful in that time. If ever there came an opportunity for a rematch, he'd surely have to prepare for a fight that eclipsed this one.

"Don't get complacent, Oliver Horn. I forget names quickly."

"Oh, I'll make sure you remember mine forever."

And with that, Oliver walked over to his friends. "Okay, let's pull out. Did we miss any injuries?"

"All healed up here! Sorry you got hurt, Marco."

"It fine. I tough. Katie not hurt. Good."

Katie sighed after healing up her familiar. The troll had used its massive body as a shield to protect her from the bees after they'd broken the

barricade from the inside with magic. Marco was pockmarked with bites and stings, but he hardly made a fuss about it.

“Let us follow you guys up out of here. C’mon, Stace, stop crying.”

Fay pulled Stacy by the hand and began walking. Oliver considered extending the same invitation to Albright, but the boy had already turned his back on them. He needn’t have worried. Oliver stood at the front of the group and led them out.

“Okay, let’s go. Don’t let down your guards when we return to the first layer—”

He made to warn them about the return trip, then froze.

“…? What is it, Oliver? Aren’t we leaving?” Guy asked.

“……”

That was Oliver’s intention, of course, if something peculiar hadn’t tripped his mental alarms.

“What…the…?”

As Oliver continued to stare, something appeared out of the blue, quaking the earth beneath his feet. Its great mass crawled across the ground, and flesh-colored tentacles extended all over its body.

“Wha—?”

Albright, who was sitting slightly away from the group, was nearly face-to-face with this danger. His eyes widened in shock, and he quickly stood up and drew his sword.

“Gah—?!”

But before he could cast a spell, the tentacles encircled him. With quick instincts, he chopped one off, but the rest dragged him toward the creature’s body. The tentacles wrapped around his neck, preventing him from casting any spells. Unable to fight back, Albright slid into the thing’s enormous frame.

“ ”

Oliver shivered at the sight, and the life-threatening danger kicked his mind into a calm, analytic mode.

Most likely, this thing’s base form was some sort of six-legged creature that crawled on the ground. Its body was almost twenty feet long, but it was difficult to make out any details due to the tentacles covering it. Some of them seemed elastic, and it had the strength and intelligence to grab a target over twenty yards away. To his knowledge, no magical beast matched this description. The only thing he could think of was a chimera, a mixture of multiple magical beasts.

“Don’t fight it, Nanao!”

She had raised her sword in order to try and save Albright, but Oliver firmly shouted at her to stop. It was suicide to approach an unknown magical beast, but that wasn’t the only reason he stopped her. What really scared him was the horde of similar beasts that appeared from behind the original. They seemed endless—first, there were four, then five, then six, then seven…

Any thoughts of winning ceased there. Abandoning all semblance of calm, Oliver roared:

“Run! Everyone, run!!”

The group snapped out of their stupor and fled. They dashed through the open space and returned to the first layer, but the creatures kept chasing them. As the path narrowed into a single upward slope, Chela spun around and cast a spell.

“Magnus tonitrus!”

A roar split their ears. The lightning bolt that had wiped out the bee swarm raced toward the mysterious beasts, which were unable to dodge. Their skin burned from the electricity, and charred tentacles fell to the ground. But the creatures didn’t stop. They slowed for a few seconds but then resumed chasing their prey with renewed vigor.

“Even that didn’t stop them… They’re resistant to electricity!”

Chela gritted her teeth and ran. Even with her elven heritage, she couldn’t fire off multiple shots at the same intensity. She was forced to resort to single incantations to buy time when—

“Kuh?!”

“Fay!”

—a tentacle shot out and grabbed Fay’s ankle. He quickly tried to cut it off, but another tentacle grabbed his right arm, preventing him from resisting any further.

“Run, Stace—!” he shouted.

Stacy tried to help, but he shoved her away. The next moment, the tentacles dragged her partner down the hall, leaving Stacy behind. She screamed in hysterics.

“Fay! FAY! NOOOOO!”

“Stop! It’ll get you, too!”

Stacy tried to go after him, but Chela grabbed her hand, and Nanao jumped in front of her.

“Pardon!”

Nanao hoisted up the crying girl. Desperately cutting back the oncoming tentacles, they hurried up the slope.

“Huff! Huff!”

“Damn! How far are they gonna chase us?!”

“They can’t fit in narrow halls at that size! Don’t give up, everyone!”

It was their only hope. After running for what seemed like an eternity, they finally arrived at a familiar crossroad. There were three paths available, and Marco silently threw himself into the widest one on the left.

“Ah—?!”

“Let him go! We can meet up later!” Oliver shouted at Katie, silently apologizing to the troll. Marco knew Katie wouldn’t be able to escape down a narrower path if he was with them, so he’d taken the initiative and split off. Impressed by the depth of Marco’s intelligence, Oliver and the others raced down the narrowest path.

“All right! We should be safe!”

Oliver threw a glance over his shoulder as they ran. The moment he thought they were out of harm’s way and breathed a sigh of relief…

“Huh?”

…a flesh-colored tentacle latched onto the bespectacled boy behind him.

“ ”

Oliver instinctively reached out his left hand. His friends ahead of him realized what was happening a second later as the tentacle dragged Pete away.

“Ah—!”

“PEEEEEETE!”

His fingertips swiped air only an inch away from his friend. Oliver could do nothing but watch as the boy was swallowed into the labyrinth’s depths.

“Guh—!”

“Stop, Oliver!”

He instinctively made to charge back, but Chela grabbed his arm and pulled with her whole body. Oliver tried to shake her off.

“You can’t save him!” she pleaded. “You saw how strong they are. If you go back, you’ll just be caught yourself!”

“But—!”

“Oliver!” Chela shouted at him with surprising anger. Tears slid down her face and hit the floor. The sight cooled his head and gnawed at his heart, threatening to break it. He was helplessly aware that the best they could manage in this situation was to call for help as soon as possible.

The six of them returned to the academy via the basin near their secret workshop and flew down the halls, searching for the first upperclassman they could find. Fortunately, their wish was soon granted.

“Oh, it’s you guys.”

They heard a familiar boy’s voice. There stood Alvin Godfrey, leading Carlos and a group of prefects.

Oliver explained the situation as quickly as he was able. “President Godfrey, some strange, powerful magical beasts are out of control on the first layer! They abducted Pete and two other first-years! Please help!”

Desperately trying to relax, Oliver prepared to answer the questions he knew would come. But surprisingly, there were none.

“I know,” Godfrey replied calmly. “So your friends got taken, too?”

Chela, sensing something was amiss, approached the upperclassman. “Our friends, *too*? President Godfrey, what does that mean?”

As she sought confirmation, Oliver felt a sense of terror take hold of him.

What Carlos said next settled it. “It means you aren’t the first to bring this up. We’ve got eight other reports of the same thing—over seventy first- and second-years have been abducted. And from the descriptions of the beasts, we already know the cause…”

They paused, unable to continue. Godfrey finished the sentence for them:

“Ophelia Salvadori has been consumed by the spell.”

Everyone stiffened. The air froze, and a heavy silence fell over the hall.

“ _____ ”

Oliver was the only one who recalled a certain memory. Ophelia’s voice came back to him vividly, as did the words she’d left him with after their chat:

“Limit your adventures and stick to your studies in the academy—especially for the next few months.”

“Return to the dorms immediately. You are forbidden to step foot in the labyrinth until the situation is resolved. On my authority as student body president—this academy is now on high alert.”

The words Godfrey spoke and the sternness of his tone made Oliver realize that the situation was much darker and more sinister than they could even imagine.

END

Afterword

Hello, this is Bokuto Uno. How are you doing? Have you gotten accustomed to this academy yet? Hesitation and fear abound, but the first-years are rapidly learning to survive Kimberly. At the same time, they are accepting a life so close to death. The most fundamental beliefs among mages will take hold within them.

This is when the adventure bug first bites the students. It is also where the accidents begin.

Of course, this academy does not forbid such actions. Everything is as was explained during orientation: Your life and death are in your own hands. All students are given this right equally.

…Thus, this marks the end of the first year.

The darkness of the labyrinth stretches deep. Be sure to prepare yourself fully before you begin your journey. Proceed with caution, courage, and cunning—but above all, be ready for anything.

At the end of their journey, they will surely learn what it means to live and die as a mage—and whatever else lies in store for them there.

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